

홍정훈 지음 | K KUEM, 철이 일러스트

機神傳記
DAWN BRINGER
기 신 전 기 던 브 링 어

카지노 로얄

2





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NOVEL
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기신전기 던브링어 — 2

기신 디아블로를 물리치고 만끽하는 포상휴가. 과거의 전쟁영웅 레저스는 동료들과 함께 휴양 행성의 카지노 호텔에서 오랜만에 즐거운 한때를 보낸다. 그렇지만 휴식도 잠시, 급작스럽게 벌어진 동맹군의 쿠데타 때문에 레저스 일행은 또다시 위기에 처하게 된다. 아사 종족 공주이자 기신 사이키의 파일럿 리즈나에게 아로하가 납치당하고, 스스로 과거의 전쟁 영웅 레저스와 루이스라 주장하는 동맹의 수장들과도 조우하게 되는데…….

인기작가 홍정훈의 상쾌한 로봇액션 & 신감각 스페이스 오페라 제2막!

NE



기신전기 던브링어

2

홍정훈 지음
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영상노트

홍정훈 지음 | KKUEM, 철이 일러스트



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DAWN BRINGER

기신전기 던브링어

카지노로얄

2

NOV. L
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알로하! 크리티컬 성씨에 어서오세요.





초기신
더스쿠브링어
등장!



동맹군 원수
루이스 메이나드다!

동맹군 대장
레저스 던브링어...



아로하!



만약 이게 그녀의 생명을
좌우하는 것인 줄 알았다면 나는...



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Chapter 01: Our Luxurious Vacation!

Part 1

The Space Federation had been in a constant state of war since its formation.

The heavy military spending posed a severe problem for the Federation's economy. Not even its superior technology could provide a relief for the worsening deficit in its trades with its autonomous member planets. The lack of trade income caused the Federation to levy military funds, and that could only be detrimental to the trust between the Federation and its members.

Out of fear that the members would attempt to overthrow the Federation's government, the Federation committed the most appalling crime against all of humanity.

That is... the Federation's assistance policy for women relocating to Federation-controlled planets.

For unmarried young women, employment priority was given to them in Federation-controlled areas. This led to a mass migration of the female populace out of rural and developing planets, thus heavily skewing the ratio of the sexes.

With a great percentage of the eligible women gone, many young bachelors were left behind on their home planets. It is clear that the policy is the Federation's vile plot to stymie the members' population growth and ultimately remain in power.

Thus, we, the Autonomous Planet Manus Solidum ^[1], publicly denounce the Federation's attempt to unbalance the population's sex ratio, and we demand that the Federation discontinue the manufacture of male Replicants and relinquish the technology to produce female Replicants.

- Head of Autonomous Planet Manus Solidum, William Mayer

* * *

I thought I'd take my time to read what looked like an ambitious declaration pasted on the message board at the airport lounge. Quite amazingly, it seemed to be incorporating a

¹ The original name is 남성연대, which likely alludes to a real Korean group of the same name. Since 'Man of Korea' hardly fits the setting and there are no appropriate translations for it anyway (barring terrible word salads coming from direct translation), now there's a... Latin... name?

sophisticated literary device that was popular on old Earth, which commonly followed with a gleeful expression from those with finer tastes that went "What a twist!"

"What a beautiful piece of writing. It's almost nostalgic."

Well, despite the idiotic message, the data that they've presented was at least believable. It made sense that the Federation was trying to prevent their loss of power through financial deficit by decreasing the number of females on member planets.

"Hmm. I think it's safe to ignore the last part, but there's some truths in it, yes? It really is unnatural for an entire planet to have significantly more males than females in the middle of a war. It's definitely purposeful."

A girl stood beside me, reading through the poster as I did. She had short, brown hair-- maybe hazel-gold is more appropriate-- and below were her bright, emerald eyes that stood out, contrasting her gentle, almost docile face as they sped through the words.

"It's not surprising that there's a feeling of dissent against the Federation. Now they ended up with the Alliance on their hands, so the Federation should prepare for the time when the Alliance grows powerful enough to attract more Autonomous Planets into their union."

She walked closer to me as she talked.

...Ah, her hair had a pleasant scent.

At a glance, she almost looked like a prepubescent boy. At another glance, she had a very pretty, womanly neck that drew a pleasing curve downward, meeting with her collarbones further below. Her clothes weren't very revealing, yet that one area was particularly satisfying to look at. Maybe this is what people call a classy sort of beauty?

'.....Wha-? What was I doing just now? I better focus.'

That almost sounded like it's straight out of an adult novel! I surprised myself with the way I thought about her.

No, no, control yourself! If I didn't know any better, I might have thought that she was some cute girl traveling on her summer break, but she was actually Luise Maynard, the Chief of Staff and the Admiral of the old Space Federation.

Despite the title of Chief of Staff, her appearance was that of a teenager who barely began maturing. If I didn't know the truth, I would have said that she's seventeen-- no, definitely a lot younger than that.

Of course, I, myself, used to be a Vice Admiral of an entire space fleet, a hundred and twenty years back.

Vice Admiral and Commander of Dawn Corps, Lezirth Dawnbringer. History says that the Vice Admiral had died a hero in a great final battle against the Letix, but as everyone could see, I was alive and kicking. And yet I also looked like a common teenager.

It was partly because we were born from an alien race, the Old One of the Letix Uberlords, the beings that revealed the secrets of hyperspace travel to humanity. We were the first generation of the Replicants, the Children of Letix. On top of that, we were in cold sleep for about a hundred and twenty years...

Yet there was no scientific support about why we weren't growing older. There were many more Children of Letix, most of whom grew older and sometimes died of old age. As far as I could remember, the only Children of Letix who never grew older were Admiral Luise Maynard, and the one named the Alpha Type for being the first of its kind: me.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I shouldn't be saying this while we're on a vacation... I'll never drop this habit, really. Heh heh." Admiral Luise apologized, apparently believing that she bored me into silence.

I shook my head. "No, that's fine. I was just thinking to myself. I'm sorry that I didn't pay any attention, actually."

"Oh, you. Let loose a little! How often do we get these vacations? I can't wait~!" Her emerald eyes sparkled.

I felt for her. Back when she was the Chief of Naval Staff, she tirelessly slaved over the Federation's military computers. It was all thanks to the hundred and twenty years of cold sleep that she got a break from it... wait, that's a strange way to put it, isn't it?

"I'm happy, too. They gave us an entire month of paid vacation! Did the Federation finally have a change of heart?"

"Giving a well-deserved break to fighting soldiers is a natural thing to do, of course. If you were a normal human being, Lezirth, I'm sure you would be in a hospital bed for at least a month after that last battle! This is only normal! And if you consider all the vacations that we've missed, not even ten years would make up for them!" She shouted, and turned her head away.

I couldn't see her face then, but I heard her say something along the lines of 'This should have been just us two, but he ended up bringing two thieving cats along. Psh.' I must have been hearing things.

At the same time, across the airport lounge, around the taxi lounge, two more girls were calling for us from afar. "Luise! Lezirth! The taxi's here!"

Surrounded by walls of overgrown palm trees and aloe plants, a model-like girl with silvery hair waved at us. She had a pink sun cap that neatly shaped her shoulder-long hair, along with a semi-backless blouse, short, tight jeans, and synthetic fiber skirt that was vertically asymmetric. Perhaps embarrassed of her considerable height, she wore a pair of glossy sandals that lacked heels, and yet her smooth, athletic legs did not fail to attract attention.

If any other feature pulled even more attention, it was definitely the pair of white wings on her back. They were small enough to pass as a costume piece to be worn at a masquerade ball, but those were real, natural wings. She was born between a human and an Elcro, an alien race noted for their wings.

She is Ensign Meihowa, our superior after the hundred and twenty years of cold sleep.

Beside her was a tan girl with long, striking red hair and pointed ears, chewing bubble gum. She is Sergeant Aroha Pereira, also our superior like Ensign Meihowa.

The two girls respected their difference in rank for official matters, but they seemed to have a friendly relationship when off the record. The fact that Ensign Meihowa is a Half-Elcro may have contributed, since Sergeant Aroha is also a hybrid, though with a human and another alien race called the Asa.

She wore blue jeans that looked a bit too tight, a white tank top that contrasted her copper skin, covered up by a shirt to presumably protect against the blazing sunlight, as shown by her baseball cap which bore the logo of the Chicago Cubs, a team that had never seen a single victory after its debut in the space-wide stage.

"Hurry up, I didn't come here to get a tan."

"Aren't you tanned already?"

"What? No, this is my natural colour!" She giggled.

I approached the taxi to start loading our baggage into the trunk.

"Aloha! Welcome to Critik!" The taxi driver, an aging man with white hair and dark skin, came out to greet us in his shorts and a generic Hawaiian shirt. His greeting felt a little exaggerated, but it did gently remind me that I was indeed on a relaxing vacation.

The surprising part was that the taxi was driven by a human being. While most military vehicles needed to be precisely driven by humans, most civilian taxis were remotely operated from taxi companies. It was astonishing to see a taxi operated by a human on a civilian planet.

The taxi driver took and stacked our baggages in the trunk, and when it was full, he put the remaining ones on the roof of the car. "Welcome to Critik-4, everyone. Is it your first time?"

"Ah, yes."

"I suppose I could say it's my first time."

Vacation Planet Critik-4.

Specifically, it was the Dominion of Space Federation Critik-4, but this place came to be widely known as the Vacation Planet. It was understandable, considering how Critik-4's major industries were mining, farming, and fishing.

Back when I was still a Vice Admiral, this planet was in development as the terraformation phase had just completed, and basic infrastructure had settled in. So, I was pretty hopeful for my experience here. It had one hundred and twenty years to completely change itself, so it was safe to say that it was my first time on this planet.

'That aside, I'm a little worried about my vacation funds.'

How much would it cost to pay for a human-driven taxi? The Space Federation's minimum wage was about ten thousand credits an hour, right?

To add, Admiral Luise and I were lowly Apprentices in the navy as of now, so our wages were right at the minimum. What's worse, we'd been in the navy for less than a month. In that short time period, we encountered an incident in the Azoran System and got a month's break as compensation for our efforts.

Well, we did have five million credits as an extra compensation, so maybe that would be enough?

But soon, I noticed that the numbers on the taxi meter had been barely climbing up during our trip to the our destination hotel. We were going to a busy city full of casinos and hotels,

and yet the taxi fare seemed to be less than two thousand credits. So, the taxi driver earns less than our minimum wage?

Oh, wait, maybe the Federation minimum wage only applies to Federation-controlled planets, and the other planets are given different minimum wages to follow?

"That was pretty cheap." I exclaimed as I approached the hotel entrance.

Sergeant Aroha grinned, and gestured a V-sign at me. "Prices at these autonomous planets are extremely low, you know. What we really need to watch out for are hotel prices and limousine services operated by large companies. They usually adjust to Federation prices."

"You sound like you've been having some fun, Sergeant Aroha. How do you know all this?" Ensign Meihowa asked.

Sergeant Aroha shook her head. "Hey, I'm a soldier too. Do you really think I'd have a lot of vacation days? I've mostly been window shopping and having vacation fantasies online."

"I get online window shopping, but what do you mean by vacation fantasies?"

"I read about other people's vacations, and then I dream about how I'd feel like if I were there myself."

I felt sad after hearing that.

"But hey, we have an entire month of paid vacation! This is going to be great!" Admiral Luise shouted, raising her arms into the air. She looked like a playful child for a moment.

"I know! We haven't even been in service for a month, so we're going to end up with more vacation days than work days."

"Yay~! Look at that! It's a roller coaster!"

She mostly ignored my reply and became excited over roller coasters that twisted around various hotels. We weren't at an amusement park, and yet there were still all kinds of rides like the swinging ship and roller coasters. As expected of casino resorts.

Our destination was a casino city, full of hotels that each had a massive casino on the first floor. The entire city sparkled and dazzled like a part of a musical theatre set, with a large circular lake at the center with a musical fountain. Along the edges of the lake were many, many brand name stores.

Sergeant Aroha's eyes sparkled as she turned her attention toward the brand name stores. "Fufufu. I've been waiting for this day..."

Tsk tsk, Sergeant Aroha. Don't let your window shopping habits become anything other than window shopping.

They were quite blatantly placed there to attract customers that had just hit the jackpot. A sergeant's pay couldn't possibly afford any of that!

"But why a casino resort?" Admiral Luise restlessly glanced around. She had the eyes of a surprised rabbit after spotting some waitresses walking around in revealing bikinis, serving people in the hall of the casino. It was understandable how she would be shocked after spending most of her life in a formal military setting.

"Because casino resort hotels are cheap, Luise. And all the food is even cheaper! Look, they're serving free margaritas!"

"Wait, Aroha, that's just a plot to get gamblers drunk and make them waste all of their money! That's not what's important anyway, look at this here! Shanghai mitten crabs! It's not some mixed meat or canned crab, it's real crab meat! It's the first time I've seen something like this!" Ensign Meihowa shouted in excitement, which was a rare sight. Usually, she spoke in an extremely formal and cold tone, but even she was quite relaxed for her vacation.

And she really likes crab, huh?

I do recall seeing a strange label on a military ration energy gel that said... 'crab meat included', or something like that. I remember complaining about it, thinking to myself 'Who'd eat this crap? They really don't care what goes in military rations as long as it's edible! There's no saving military foods!' ... But in retrospect, I was wrong about everything.

I came to a realization that the world is full of different people with different tastes. Ah, I should be clearer; I'm only talking about the energy gels. Shanghai mitten crabs are probably quite delicious.

"It shouldn't even be twelve o'clock in this time zone. It's too early to check in. Shall we leave our baggage here and walk around the city first?" Admiral Luise suggested, and everyone agreed. She was visibly excited. And I was, too; I could have fun just by looking at the streets in front of the hotel!

"Alright, let's get to the reception!"

We strolled over to the front desk. The receptionist happily greeted us. "Welcome, how may I help you?"

"We're checking in today. We reserved a room with this ticket.." Sergeant Aroha presented a ticket that she claimed to have been given by her sister. The receptionist took it.

...Hmm, everything is going a little too well.

And then the receptionist was going to say...

"This is fake! You think some lowly minimum-wage Apprentice has any right to stay a month at our great hotel?! Dream on!"

Then we'd probably be kicked out of here.

But the receptionist kept her smile up, tapping gently on her keyboard. "Miss Aroha Pereira? Yes, check-in can only be done after noon. Do you want us to hold onto your baggage?"

"Yes, please."

We left most of our belongings with them, other than a few essentials.

"I was incredibly worried that they wouldn't take the ticket." I commented honestly.

Admiral Luise nodded and agreed. "Yes, me too."

Originally, Admiral Luise and I were quite the penny-pinchers. While we received huge paychecks as higher-ups in the navy, we had nowhere to spend any of it in a meaningful way. Moreover, both of our saved wealth had been fully returned to the Federation, since we were officially dead to them.

In the end, we were just poor, homeless Apprentices! I was afraid that we'd have to sleep out in the streets if the ticket hadn't been valid.

"Even if it's a reward for a frequent-flyer program -- a whole month's worth of hotel reservation? I'm almost sorry for Sergeant Aroha!"

"Yeah, so why don't you praise me?"

"Oh, praised be the Aroha. Grovel, grovel."

I playfully pretended to grovel at her feet, like Ensign Meihowa did to her a while back, and everyone burst out in laughter. We all seemed to be quite excited for the first day of our vacation.

But soon, Ensign Meihowa, Sergeant Aroha, and Admiral Luise sat in front of the musical fountain, looking incredibly depressed. After a single trip around the brand name shops, the

girls had noticed the price tags on their products and immediately fled from the shops in sheer terror.

Tsk tsk, I did warn them to not to go in unprepared.

I bought ice cream from an ice cream cart nearby to try and lift their mood back up.

"Okay, the matcha-flavoured one is for Luise, chocolate chip cookies for Aroha, and, uh... toothpaste mint ice cream... is for Ensign Meihowa... right?"

What the hell is 'toothpaste mint'? Is it legal to sell it in the first place? I know, the universe is infinite and all that, but there has to be some limit on people's preferences!

The girls sluggishly took their ice cream. Even Sergeant Aroha looked like she was going to cry, and she usually was the brightest, most energetic person here. The power of the price tags must have been pretty deadly. Unlike a jewelry store found in an average mall, every brand shop here was owned by their original respective companies.

When a customer approaches any of them, a tall, suited man appears to guide them and treats them like they're talking to the emperor of the universe. While they wait, an employee who looks more like a butler than anything else brings in tea, then finally a woman absolutely covered in products of their company appears, suggesting products that fit the customer the best. The service was so formal and well-organized that it was almost too much for me.

"Holy... I thought this place would be like a trip to the mall. This is too... luxurious for me!" said Ensign Meihowa, after taking deep breaths.

"Hah, well, it looks like a Platoon Sergeant's payroll is nowhere enough. What about your wages, Ensign?"

"Probably about the same as yours. I got to be an Ensign right away because I'm from an officer cadet school, but I haven't been in the service any longer than you."

"Hahahaha! Looks like our only hope is getting a jackpot at the casino!" cried Sergeant Aroha, who sounded like she was about to go insane.

She didn't appear to be joking about it, so I immediately spoke up. "Hey, no! Don't walk into their trap! We need to spend a whole month here! We can't afford to waste any money!"

"Yeah, that's exactly why! I need to get a jackpot!"

"If you can get a jackpot just because you feel like it, they won't be in business like this."

Admiral Luise sighed quietly as I tried to stop Sergeant Aroha. "What I'm wearing right now is borrowed from Sergeant Aroha..." She sobbed, "I only have my naval uniform apart from this. I don't have anything to change into tomorrow, what do I do?" She looked like she was going to break out in a tantrum at any second.

Really, she and I had spent more than a century in cold sleep, then joined the navy with nothing but a military rashguard. I, myself, had nothing to wear outside of a war setting, apart from cheap jeans and a shirt that had I purchased for basically nothing.

"I thought I could take care of that by shopping here..."

"Well, shouldn't there be at least one discount store somewhere here? There must be some place where we can buy things with minimum wage's worth of money."

"Shopping at discount stores in a place like this? Ugh, what a disaster." Ensign Meihowa complained, taking a bite out of her ice cream.

Maybe because of its name 'toothpaste mint', the blue chunk on her ice cream cone looked nearly identical to a clump of solidified toothpaste. That said, I got very curious as to how the mysterious 'toothpaste mint' would taste.

"Can I have some of that?"

"Hmm? Ah... Ah, oh-okay. Only if you eat the part that I haven't touched yet." Ensign Meihowa held her ice cream towards me, her face slightly red. I took a small bite.

Hmm... It tasted somewhat like a cross between peppermint and spearmint, and it's like-- something found in a gum factory in the Iberian Peninsula, where an employee would brush her teeth at the common room before returning to the production lines-- and she would use a toothpaste that tasted exactly like this.

Weird.

Well, it wasn't terrible, but I couldn't tell any difference between that and some flavoured toothpaste intended for kids. One difference, I guess, was that the former is edible, latter is not.

"How is it? It's good, right?" Meihowa asked, brightly smiling.

...Agh, my eyes! I averted my eyes from her bright, radiant smile and began sweating profusely. "Uh... yeah, oh, ha-ha, what a... freshening flavour!"



Anyway, I needed to raise their spirits immediately by doing something special for them... I dug around in my travel bag and pulled out everything I could. I had a bunch of pamphlets taken from the information kiosk back at the airport. Maybe one of these would prove useful.

"Oh, this is, hm... aquarium ticket discount coupon?"

One of the pamphlets indicated that the Federation's largest aquarium was on Critik-4. And it was very close by.

Casino resort hotels placed attractions like circuses, theme parks, and concerts nearby to bring more people to their casino. The aquarium was one of those attractions, and it was built into a hotel.

"Alright, we should go there! What's an aquarium?"

"Aquarium? Isn't that some glorified sushi ingredient storage?" Sergeant Aroha replied, uninterested.

What happened to ladylike sentiments? Did she accidentally sell it off? Of all the things she could think of aquariums... sushi ingredients?!

"A long time ago, back in the days of the Earth Federation, I heard that people held religious ceremonies based around watching fish swim. Is that true, Lezirth?"

Neither of those girls seemed to know what an aquarium was, as expected of young girls born in the space age.

"Aquarium, huh? I'm sure I saw most types of fish through digital holograms... do you think I missed anything?"

Admiral Luise appeared to be equally uninterested. Ugh. It was probably an aftershock effect remaining from the brand name shop's onslaught of price tags. It couldn't be helped.

"Let's go anyway, I'll pay for the tickets! You'll go, right?"

The aquarium was a bait set by casinos in the first place, and with a thirty percent discount, I thought it would be fine to pay for four people's worth of entrance tickets.

The three ladies were still apathetic, but they didn't reject my offer that I'd pay for them. I briefly worried that I dug a trap for myself, since they were suddenly willing to go.

"I guess we have some time before check-in."

"Alright. I am a little interested in the old culture of the Earth Federation."

When the two space-age girls began following me, Admiral Luise hurried along, her face glowing red. "II know what an aquarium is, Lezirth! Don't bunch me in with them!"

Was that really something to be embarrassed about?

* * *

Soon, I found myself surrounded by some over excited girls going 'Kya~ Kya~' every second. A bunch of space-hicks, that's what they are.

The girls were quite high-strung while viewing the aquarium. Sergeant Aroha's apathy was nowhere to be found, Ensign Meihowa stopped seeing it as a religious ritual, and Admiral Luise, after being so sure that she'd already seen everything that needed to be seen, had been reduced to a blubbering wreck.

"Lezirth! Could you buy this for me?"

Admiral Luise picked out a shirt from a souvenir shop near the aquarium's exit. It had the aquarium's mascot drawn on it. Beside it, there was clearly a label that read 'for children'... It would fit her, regardless.

But why should I pay extra, when I had already paid for their tickets?

"It doesn't feel right to be at a place like this and buy souvenirs with my own money, you know? It would feel better if someone else were to buy it for me."

"All of these would work a lot better as gifts, really."

Sergeant Aroha and Ensign Meihowa butted in. Well, since Admiral Luise didn't even own a set of clothes to change into tomorrow, a single shirt wasn't too much of a problem. It was unfortunate that I had to pay for it on an Apprentice's salary, but she seemed to want one really badly, anyway.

"Oh, that's not fair. You're only buying for Luise? That's favouritism!" teased Sergeant Aroha.

Ensign Meihowa smiled and pointed at the largest space manta plushie in the shop. "Lezirth, I won't ask for anything pricy. We'll compromise with this plushie."

"...I'll buy one if I get a jackpot."

"Is that so?"

That's the most expensive one here! The price tag read seven hundred thousand credits. My weekly earning before tax deductions was about four hundred, so I would have to survive on just air for two weeks to afford that. Absolutely not!

"Ah, I'm getting hungry now. Shanghai mitten crab, was it? Let's get over there."

Feeling like seafood after a trip to the aquarium, huh? Ensign Meihowa gestured like she was wiping drool off her face. Admiral Luise was tenderly holding onto the shirt and Sergeant Aroha was busy passionately flipping through a travel guide, so it seemed that I was successful at lifting their mood.

"Shanghai crabs? That's happening at night. Hey, there's a seafood buffet nearby that we can enter for eight thousand credits each. Let's check it out."

"A buffet for only eight thousand credits? What if they have nothing but seaweed?" Admiral Luise questioned, yet her eyes were gleaming in anticipation. Since she had psionic powers, her eyes literally sparkled with Cherenkov radiation with a slight change in her emotion.

"I told you, they're all traps set by the casinos. The plan for our vacation is to take all the bait but not get reeled in, okay?"

'Though I just wanted to enjoy a shopping trip...' Sergeant Aroha quietly complained directly afterward. Still, she looked happy.

I exited the aquarium in a good mood; the girls' happiness had rubbed off on me. I noticed that the exit of the aquarium was just another entrance to a casino, which was quite clever. Of course, we simply ignored the casino machines and walked right by.

Huh?

Outside, there was a protest with people holding up sign posts.

"Down with the Federation's oppression of free planets!"

"Down with the Federation! Down with the Federation!"

A man with a loudspeaker stood up front and shouted, and the crowd before him followed. There were maybe a hundred people there. They marched down the road in front of the casino. A few groups of journalists traced their path with news cameras.

"Stop favouring Federation planets and take your anti-immigration laws back!"

"Take it back! Take it back!"

Whoa, what a perfect rhythm! They must have had a lot of practice. I knew that there had been a lot of opposition against the Federation's government, but I never thought I'd get to see a protest in action.

Suddenly, the angry mob stopped in place, and the man with the loudspeaker walked towards me. The various cameras soon followed the obvious leader of the mob.

"Hey, you! You're a worker of the Federation, aren't you?"

"Huh? Are you talking to me?" I asked, looking questioningly at the man and the barrage of microphones that made their way towards me.

"What are you people doing?!" Admiral Luise shouted. The man turned around to look at her, and suddenly looked away, his face red. Then he turned around to face me again, now bearing an even angrier expression.

"So, you work on Federation planets, right?"

"Well... I guess you could say that. What about it?" I answered.

The man put his loudspeaker up and shouted towards the mob. "Take a look, comrades! Look at this Federation worker walking around with three women in his arms! This is exactly the kind of atrocity that the Federation has shown us!"

The mob's shouts grew louder than ever.

"Waaaaaaagh!"

"That's not fair!"

"This is an outrage!"

"Let's go destroy the Federation!"

Whoa... wh-what's up with these people?!

My face lit up bright red.

Three women in my arms? Was he talking about me?! I suppose he was half right about that, but... what a joke! I had to explain myself! But that would be too embarrassing! If I spoke another word with them, I'd end up with even more of an embarrassment!

"Wait! What are you talking about?! We're just co-workers out on a group vacation! Stop making up crap!" Sergeant Aroha screamed at the mob leader.

Ensign Meihowa pulled her back. "L-let's just move on from them, Aroha."

"Yes, Aroha, please don't get angry. We shouldn't deal with these kinds of people." Admiral Luise added, signalling me with her eyes. She was silently suggesting that we could easily quell the mob with telepathy, if things were to develop any further.

But I shook my head. There were cameras pointed in our way. If not for that, Admiral Luise could knock out every one of these people with no effort..

"Okay, it's just about time. Let's go check in, shall we?"

"A-alright."

We turned our back towards the mob and headed for the hotel.

"There! There goes the debaucherous pig of the Federation!"

"Look at him! In the Federation, men get to enjoy the company of three women at the same time!"

"...Ugh."

What the hell is up with these people?! Just as the girls' mood settled down, they just ruined it again!

I turned around, but Admiral Luise pulled my arm from behind. "No, Lezirth, don't mind them."

"Okay." As she said, it looked like the situation could only get worse if I talked to them.

We returned to the hotel, almost as if we were fleeing from the mob.

...Ugh, those damn protesters! They weren't going to pester us during our entire vacation, were they?

Part 2

"So, uh... About this situation..."

In my hand was a single key taken from the hotel's reception, and I fell deep in thought.

There were three women and one man. And there was only a single key. How should I have understood the situation?

Shamefully, I was reminded of the tirade given by the mob leader. There were more women than men on Federation-controlled planets. ...What has the world become during my hundred and twenty years of cold sleep? If it's the world that had gone crazy and not me, why did Admiral Luise stay silent like the others? She was sleeping for the same time that I was!

While the elevator made its way up, I stood still like a statue, with only my eyes moving around to evaluate the developing plot.

The girls looked down from our mishap with the protesters; they were blankly staring at the cityscape outside of the elevator. It didn't appear to be a good time to ask about my problem. Not that it would ever be appropriate, anyway.

--Thump... Thump... Thump...

I felt Dawnbringer's-- ...Er, my furious heartbeat.

Huff... Huff... I became extremely nervous. As the elevator went further up, my heart hammered my chest even harder. It was the slowest elevator that I'd ever seen! My heart was going to explode at this rate!

And then the elevator finally stopped.

--Creak.

My blood ran cold as the elevator doors opened. W-was that the right thing to do? Lezirth Dawnbringer, was that the right path for him? A hundred and twenty years after, did the world's sense of morality and justice finally deteriorate like this?

But if the world around me had really changed, then that could only be a step forward, not a step back! Is it not natural for a living being to adapt to the changes in the surrounding world? Yeah, that's all there is to it!

A million thoughts crashed into each other as I took a step into the hallway.

Our belongings were already brought up to our room. A bellboy opened the entrance, and Ensign Meihowa gave him a tip.

It was difficult to face the bellboy. What kind of a man was I in his eyes? The protesters undoubtedly saw me as an awful person, and it was possible that he saw me the same way.

I carefully walked into the room. Hm... The hotel was shaped like a capital 'E', so the scene outside the window was mostly this building's walls. Since the view was terrible, it was clear

that the room wasn't this hotel's best. Oh well, though; it was a perfect fit for an Ensign, Sergeant, and two Apprentices.

In the room were two large beds. Was this meant for a single family?

"You take this one, Lezirth. Us three will take the other one." Ensign Meihowa directed me to the window-side bed. She walked over to the wall behind the beds and pulled something down. It was a room divider, which was then unfolded to separate the two beds.

Oh, so I guess now we virtually had our own rooms? Psh! I knew it was too early to get excited.

...

N-no wait, I was never excited!

...I knew it was too early to get embarrassed. II mean, worried! Too early to be worried!

...

Sob, sob... I'm sorry, I just made up a lie that I wouldn't believe in myself. I actually looked forward to it happening. Yes, I'm a guy, too.

Family rooms had two shower rooms and washrooms, so Ensign Meihowa and Sergeant Aroha went to shower first. Meanwhile, Admiral Luise connected her portable computer's displays to a large projector in the room and began searching for something.

Soon, the mob leader's ratty face showed up on the screen. Head of Autonomous Planet Manus Solidum, William Mayer-- fading blonde hair receding from his crown, amazingly thick glasses. He was the very image of an eccentric, old professor. He was in his early thirties-- Wait, with that face?! I thought he would be fifty, minimum!

"Is this the punk?!"

It had been quite a long time since the last time Admiral Luise said the word 'punk'. It was important to note that Admiral Luise would never say such words when calm. Know your enemy, she spoke to herself, as she browsed around to find the main website of Manus Solidum.

----Dah-danana, dananana.....

...Star *ars opening theme?! A very familiar music played, along with a wordy narration scrolling down on screen. The gist of it was similar to the announcement posted back at the airport lounge's bulletin board. The Federation is oppressing them, they said. The men of

autonomous planets must band together, they said. And then they somehow came to the idiotic conclusion that they must oppress female Replicants and Elcro, Asa hybrids.

The sadder part of the story was that there was a sizable support for their movement. They even pressured the Federation's government by threatening to join the Alliance should they not listen to their demands. Scary people.

What kind of thought process would lead them to think that it's a good idea to try and ally with a faction composed primarily of Elcro, Asa, and Replicants? As a group that publicly denounced them? Did they all install warp engines in their heads? How else could their train of thought take such an intergalactic leap?

“Wait, now that I think about it, weren't they filming us? What if that gets on television?”

Admiral Luise replied to me as she opened a command console, grinning. “I deleted it before it got broadcasted.”

Television networks used inter-warp communication networks too, but they were likely using low-security civilian channels instead of military-grade ones. Still, she managed to hack their system in such a short time? I stared at Admiral Luise, now with a fearful look. “Ah... y-yeah, that's a relief.”

Right, something like that has always been trivial for Admiral Luise.

Soon, Meihowa and Aroha exited the shower room. Admiral Luise and I separately showered later, and... wore the same clothes again, apart from our underwear, since we didn't have anything else to wear. Ugh. I really needed to buy more. Even the clean underwear was military-issued, so... it was quite depressing. Not that the quality was any problem-- the designs consisted of bland patterns of grey, or jungle camo.

“Then we'll go buy clothes for the two of you, then eat. Let's go down.”

“Yep. That eight-thousand-credit-buffet that I mentioned turned out to be in this hotel, too. Let's eat down there first.”

Meihowa, Aroha, Luise and I all had the same plan.

* * *

After waking up from hibernation, the only things that touched my mouth were military rations, emergency foods, and energy gels. Maybe that was the reason -- the cheap, eight thousand credits' worth of food tasted so, so good. I was mildly annoyed that we had to eat

among the busy noise of a dozen slot machines, but it was bearable. I was too satisfied with the food to complain.

“Tasty, but a little salty.” said Admiral Luise, looking just as happy.

Ensign Meihowa soon brought drinks to our table. “Wow... they have nothing but alcohol to drink.”

What a blatant trick. Salty food encourages drinking, and all drinks are alcoholic. Was it safe to understand that as them saying 'Get drunk and spend all of your money here~!'? That was the only reason why they had food and drinks at such a cheap price, huh? Who did they expect to fool with such obvious intentions?

“Don't drink too much, alright?” I advised the group as I received a pint of beer from Ensign Meihowa. Sergeant Aroha took a rimmed glass margarita, Ensign Meihowa took a lime garnished fruit punch cocktail, and Admiral Luise took a glass of pineapple punch.

We've had some depressing moments on our first day, but the memory quickly faded away after a swig from my pint. The three girls also looked pleasantly surprised at the taste of their drinks after a sip each. I quickly downed the beer, thirsty from having salty food.

They were free, sure, but was it really fine, drinking so heavily when we already knew that this was a trap?

But when I saw the happy smiles on everyone's faces, I couldn't help but smile myself. They were beautiful normally, but smiling made them even prettier.

And soon, one empty glass became two, then three, then four, and finally Ensign Meihowa began looking in her wallet. “Alrighty~ then... ju~st a little. Let's just play one ve~ry quickly, okay?” She slurred, and slowly staggered away.

Sergeant Aroha tried to stop her, but she was equally out of it. “Meihowa, n-no, don't do it... twenty thousand per day~ over twenty thousand! Twenty thousand! No more than thaaat, okay?”

“Of-of course. We gotta play around an entire month... Hic-... ohh, my...” She covered her mouth in surprise. She was pretty cute then, the way she embarrassedly looked at me with rosy cheeks-- but she was going to get rosier if I kept looking at her. I pretended to not notice her and looked away, and she continued, “We-we can't waste an entire month while we spend nothing at all! Yeah! Twenty thousand per day! Let's do it.”

“Mmh, let me play for a short while, then.” Admiral Luise also stood up. Agh, that just made me want to play too!

There were holographic numbers displayed at the top of each slot machine. Okay... That's the jackpot? Let's see... The ten-credit slot machine had a payout of eight hundred million credits. Wow, we could spend the most luxurious vacation ever if we could get that money! The other machines were equally shocking; their prizes grew to numbers that Apprentices could never hope to see in their lifetime.

Jackpots are called that because they usually don't happen, of course, but what was stopping me from getting it today? I remembered that I joked to Ensign Meihowa that I'd buy her that expensive toy if I won a jackpot... Should I buy that for her? Well, if I had that kind of money, a mere toy would mean nothing.

I started by turning twenty thousand credits into a stack of chips.

“Lezirth is playing too?” asked Sergeant Aroha, already holding a set of chips.

I shrugged. “I'm only going to spend twenty thousand credits.”

“Fufu. Don't forget about me when you win the jackpot, okay? Ah, how about marrying right here if you do? I hear marrying here can take less than an hour.”

“Psh. Don't you be the one to forget me, Sergeant.” I stuck my tongue out as a retort to her silly remark, and submerged myself into the sea of slot machines.

Hmm... what now? The cheapest slot machines to start, I guess? I started by playing with the ten-credit slot machines.

...

Th-that was lucky! I was maybe playing for ten minutes tops, and my starting twenty thousand credits bloated up to twenty four thousand. I earned four thousand! I used a ten-credit machine to earn four thousand, so I would have earned four hundred thousand at a thousand credit machine! And the ten thousand one would have given me four million! Ugh, what a waste!

And the jackpot for that machine? Twenty giga credits! Twenty billion! B-but wait, wouldn't my starting funds run out in seconds if things don't go too well? Then, I should move up to thousand first..

...

Soon, I got away from the machine with none of my starting chips.

That was to be expected. I may have underestimated the casino.

Well, what about the others?

I walked around the casino and quickly found Ensign Meihowa. She seemed to have lost all of her funds like I did; she was staring at the hologram television installed in the middle of the casino, taking sips from her cocktail. Some men tried to get close to her and flirt with her, but she refused to give them any attention.

When I approached her, she drunkenly giggled after noticing me. “Ah, it's Lezirth. Heeh heh heh.”

Yep, she was drunk. She acted very differently than usual. The men around her got up and left angrily when they saw her smiling at me.

“What are you doing here? Did yours go well at all?”

“Uhhm, no... I losht it all, heh...”

“.....”

She mumbled with a drunken slur and pretended to hit her head with her fist. If she were to gesture like that out of context, I might have mocked her for trying too hard to be cute, but she was drunk at the moment... and cute.

“I lost everything too. It doesn't take too long to lose twenty thousand, huh.”

Ensign Meihowa laughed in a silly ah-ha-ha and gently patted my back. “Me too, me too... but that's okay! Let's just say that was payment for the buffet and the drinks! Considering how much we ate and drink, this is a fine trade.”

Truthfully, if we were to eat and drink that much, we would have easily lost a couple hundred thousand credits. With that thought, I felt that we did indeed get our money's worth.

“Right? Hey, this is pretty tasty.”

“Don't drink too much. What about the others?”

I looked toward my side.

Hmm?

Sergeant Aroha sat crooked with a gloomy face, pulling on the lever of a slot machine. In front of her was a huge mound of empty margarita glasses. Most importantly, that slot machine was the ten thousand credits one!

“Whoa?!”

Meihowa and I immediately broke out of our drunken stupor. We ran behind Aroha and pulled her away. “What are you doing, Aroha?!”

“Ah... Meihowa, Lez-...irth...”

Aroha had the most depressing expression.

...Wait, seriously? She was kidding, right?!

“...How much did you spend?”

“About three million credits, maybe?”

“....”

Colours drained from our faces.

She hadn't spent our entire vacation fund yet, but all that on the first day?! We were supposed to use it for at least a month! Still, I had to keep calm and feel sorry for Aroha. The victim is always the most distressed one in a tragedy, after all.

“Th-that's alright. We'll scrape together whatever we have left for you, so let's stop here.”

“Mmh, okay...”

Aroha's usual grin was nowhere to found. She looked more like an empty husk of her former self. Whew... what a scary place, this casino! I should have known that this place was a source of all evils!

“Wait a minute! Where's Luise?!”

“Oh-oh no! I can't find her!”

I left Aroha with Meihowa and began looking around for Admiral Luise. But only an endless line of slot machines came into my sight. She had no ordinary appearance, so I should have been able to notice her right away. Maybe she was kidnapped? Mugged? Even though the casino had psionic suppressors, Admiral Luise could beat an ordinary human being without any effort. But what if there really was a secret organization that's trying to remove us, and now they've come to kidnap her?!

Suddenly, a loud cheer came from somewhere and stopped my panic attack.

Huh, what was that? I turned around, and there was a huge crowd surrounding a card table.

“Excuse me.”

I dug through the crowd. On the other side and behind the card table was a short-haired girl, sitting on a gigantic pile of chips.

“Oh--!”

Seeing her, I became frightened. Could she have used her psionic powers to cheat her game? Admiral Luise was powerful enough to bypass the effect of psionic suppressors, but that could not stop her from getting detected. And the casino's network should be mostly localized, so it wasn't likely that she was able to hack their system.

“Uh...” Meihowa and Aroha caught up to me and joined my surprise. Admiral Luise kept herself busy by stacking her chips into towers, and winked at us when we approached her.

“What is it, Sergeant Aroha? Why the long face?”

“Oh, about that...”

When I explained our situation to her, she grabbed a tower of cookies-and-cream-coloured chips and spread them on a chip counting panel. She then shoved it towards Aroha. “Get those cashed in. After you make up for Aroha's losses, you three can split them equally.”

Aroha took a single chip from the pile with shaky hands and brought it closer to me. The chip's label read '100K'.

...Uh, so, each chip is a hundred thousand credits? At a glance, I counted about a hundred chips, so there was at least ten million.

Aroha and Meihowa shivered all the way to the casino cashier.

We weren't all going to get arrested right there, right? There won't be a certain sergeant and an ensign getting arrested today, right? And we won't be sent away along with them?

A bunch of horrifying thoughts crossed my mind, but Aroha and Meihowa soon returned safely, smiling their happiest smiles yet, hopping back to us in joy. If they haven't gone insane after losing all of their chips for cheating, they were probably happy about cashing in all of those chips.



“Hmm... alright, how about a little break? I should go shopping for new clothes. Fufu.” Admiral Luise acted like she was the queen of the world, stretching her arms like she had done nothing. That was okay; for that moment, she really was the queen of the world. When the crowd around her cheered in awe, she grabbed a handful of hundred credit chips and threw them in the air. The crowd cheered even louder and piled around the flying chips.

Hundred credits. I imagined it would just be a hassle to bother picking them up, but I had forgotten that there was a big difference between the Federation planets' economy and theirs. A hundred may have meant a lot more to them than us.

She looked like a real, professional gambler. A pair of sunglasses and a huge lit cigar in her mouth and the scene was perfect. While the onlookers busily mobbed around the fallen chips, I scraped the chips off of the table in front of Luise. Seriously, how much was that?

“Maybe I should give up being a soldier and become a professional gambler!” Admiral Luise contemplated, and... that really did sound like a great idea.

* * *

Cashing in every chip totalled to about twenty million credits. That was after making up for Aroha's losses. An apprentice's weekly pay before tax deduction was about four hundred thousand credits, so there was no further explanation needed.

She earned that in less than an hour! And she hadn't used her powers to cheat. She combined math, bluffing, and mind games together for a flawless victory of her wits.

The cashier smiled brightly and asked if she wanted to store the money in the casino's vault. Admiral Luise shook her head. Once the money got transferred over to her account, she held the tips of her skirt and curtsied, and returned to us.

It was difficult to look directly at her.

“Fufufu. Praise your new queen!” Admiral Luise grinned. Her boastful attitude did not fit her childlike visage too well, but for that moment, a strong desire to praise and serve welled up from within.

“Oh, praised be the great Admiral Luise Maynard!”

“We are not worthy! Grovel, grovel!”

“Grovel, grovel MK-II.”

We praised her together. Sergeant Aroha, especially, talked like she was conversing with the living form of Ksitigarbha. That was understandable, considering how she was sent to the afterlife and then back.

“Ahem, Lezirth~! My shoulders feel stiff from lifting those playing cards! Massage them immediately!”

“Yes, my lady!” I immediately jumped up to give her a massage, but her smooth shoulders and her beautiful neck distracted me.

It was difficult to look directly at her.

Kiss kiss, sigh sigh, were all I could think when I looked at her neck. No, wait! I will never succumb to such dirty thoughts! Instead, I will think of huff huff, slap slap...? Okay, no, that's much worse than before. I should stick with my previous plan. ...Wait, what was I thinking about? It was going to get extremely awkward if I suddenly didn't give her a massage!

I earnestly massaged her shoulders, looking away from her body. Admiral Luise giggled and continued her arrogant act, and soon stopped.

“Alright~ shall we go shopping soon? I really need something else to wear. Follow me, everyone! I had a few lucky streaks today, so I'll celebrate it with gifts for all of you!”

Such heartwarming words! We followed her out with pure admiration radiating from our eyes. Sergeant Aroha and Ensign Meihowa looked particularly ecstatic as they pranced toward the brand name shops by the big fountain. Those shops may have thrown the two ladies into depression at one point, but they say that the sun shines even on mouse holes. They were in very high spirits for once.

...But after a while, I suddenly noticed; where was Admiral Luise? I turned around to find her moving to the opposite side, a huge discount store that mostly sold cheap necessities.

“...Hey, hold up.” I quickly approached and pulled back Aroha and Meihowa. I had grabbed Aroha by the tip of her shirt, but for Meihowa, it was one of her wings.

“Kyaa-!” Ensign Meihowa turned around and angrily glared at me, crossing her arms to hide her chest (Chest? Why not her wings?).

“Ah, I'm sorry. But Admiral Luise went that way...”

“Oh... Why's Lu-Luise going over there?”

“She's being cheap after all that?”

Meihowa and Aroha flashed a dejected look. But when Admiral Luise spun around and scoffed at them, their expressions quickly disappeared. Aroha, especially, was in no position to be complaining to her about anything. No one had any courage or right to complain to our one and only saviour (?!). We quietly followed her.

The two girls looked unwilling to begin, but their walking posture returned to a joyous prance. They looked like some muppets from a morning cartoon for kids. Now was a good time to apply a CG effect that would make flowers bloom from their footsteps.

Discount shop or not, who's going to refuse free stuff? It could be fun!

* * *

Though nothing like the brand name shops or luxurious malls, discount stores offered their own unique feeling of abundance. A huge variety of items lined the shelves, waiting for a buyer. I felt like I'd become rich from seeing them.

There we bought some things needed for our travels, and some sets of clothes. Admiral Luise and I especially lacked things to wear, so we took our time buying more. We were worried that we would end up with too much to carry around, but it turned out that there was an automated delivery system that brought them directly to our hotel room.

"Ah... it was scary, but it was also fun." Sergeant Aroha sighed in relief, drinking coffee. We were taking another short break at a café near the entrance of the shopping mall.

"You should really take a moment to reflect, Aroha." Meihowa criticised, but she was smiling instead of being angry. I was just as happy after being given free money and new clothes.

"Heh... we're still on our first day of our vacation, right?"

"Kuh, O-oh no, I can't stop laughing!"

It really was only our first day, and many fun things had happened already. I couldn't wait for the days to come. What could we do with the money? Heliskiing? Ah, I'm already excited over thinking about things we could do

"Ahem! All is due to my generous act of charity, Lezirth! Continue massaging my shoulders!" Admiral Luise shrugged exaggeratedly and turned her back against me. She looked so cute acting high and mighty with the face of a child... And the mood of the moment made her look just that much cuter.

“Yes ma'am!” I approached her and began working on her shoulders. Aroha and Meihowa worked on each of her feet in the meantime, and it really looked as if she were a queen... or that we were operating a massage parlour.

“Now, shall we go have some Shanghai mitten crabs?” And Ensign Meihowa was still thinking about the crabs.

“We'll get fat. Give us some time to digest and then we'll go.” Compared to toothpaste-mint ice cream or crab-flavoured energy gel, real crab meat was far more of an acceptable food. Yet, I was still full at the moment, partially because of the huge buffet from before, and then some alcohol shortly after that.

“Then, can we return to the hotel instead? There's probably a fitness club in it. Let's get some exercise and sweat away everything we ate today, and we'll spend time there until dinner.”

“No, wait, I want to unwrap the things we bought and think about what to wear.”

And so we all left the café.

I could hear a few people whispering about us outside of the café. They seemed to be tourists, too, judging by the ragged doll-hat that was probably from an amusement park nearby.

“Whoa, look at that! It's an Elcro! And an Asa, too...”

“Kya, aliens! What's going on? They have to be part-timers in costumes!”

“Shh, they might hear us! Hm, they look too real to be costumes.”

It was a couple, quietly whispering to themselves while peering at us.

The Federation was at war, primarily against the Elcro and the Asa, so it was understandable for people to be curious about Sergeant Aroha and Ensign Meihowa, whose races were apparent from their looks.

But we weren't monkeys at a zoo.

“What a great world! There are aliens on this planet!”

“Stop staring at them! You're just checking out the cute girls, aren't you?” The woman yelled and poked the man in his sides. The couple left, arguing with each other.

“...Those bastards.”

“Ha ha ha. Don't mind them, we get that a lot.” Sergeant Aroha guffawed.

Ensign Meihowa shrugged. "It's a little too late to get mad about little things like that. Let's just return to the hotel."

We made our way back to the hotel, our mood having taken a small hit.

* * *

As expected, everything that we had purchased at the stores was brought to our room. The mound of boxes and packagings reminded me of presents beneath a Christmas tree. My annoyance from a moment ago quickly disappeared when I took a look at all of this new swag. "When did Santa come by? Oh, but I might be a little too old to be getting Christmas presents from him!"

Ensign Meihowa didn't seem too pleased with my joke. "That's no good, Lezirth. It's not even Christmas yet, and you're not too old for... for..." But she soon began unwrapping a box for herself with a great, big smile on her face. Inside the box was a civilian-use electric bike. Compared to the military's, it was extremely light-- at only five kilograms or so-- made with carbon nanotube. If I recall correctly, it wasn't cheap at all, but Admiral Luise had earned too much to care for such details. "Mmph... can I really take this?"

"You already bought it, you know."

Ensign Meihowa smiled, gently caressing her shiny new bike. "Nngh... th-that's obvious, but... thanks, I'll put it to good use."

Sergeant Aroha had purchased various cosmetics, makeup kits, and health foods, in addition to new clothes, swimsuits, and sunglasses. Combined, they were much more expensive than what I had purchased, but they still amounted to less than Ensign Meihowa's bike.

Admiral Luise bought, other than new clothes, a bunch of new software. She booted them up on her computer and began talking about her new tech. "I see that they've added a new library of instructions for their language. Who would have ever thought that 'Alpha C++ Blender' would live to see its twentieth major release? There were no improvements in the world of hardware, but it looks like the software side is still going very strong."

Quantum computers could theoretically improve infinitely with additional qubits. However, for conventional computers, reducing the size to lessen circuitry delays was an important but limiting consideration. Unfortunately, before Admiral Luise and I were put into cold sleep-- that is, a hundred and twenty years ago-- conventional computing had already reached its physical limit. That was only a part of the bigger problem; kinetics, electrical

engineering, material science, many fields of research had been stunted. They were all already pushed to the boundaries of the physical realm.

“Lezirth. Are you really fine with just that, Lezirth? I have a lot of credits remaining.”

“Oh, I'm fine with these.” All I had for myself was some clothes, underwear, and a hat and a pair of sunglasses to cover myself from the sun. In total, they added up to one-tenth of Meihowa's luxury bike... but I didn't want anything in particular, either.

We were going to be fighting a war after the vacation, anyway.

After having unboxed everything, Aroha and Meihowa had begun arranging the clothes in the hotel's closet.

Suddenly, a ringtone echoed in the room.

Sergeant Aroha shrugged, pulled out her portable computer and answered the call. “Yes, Aroha here.”

“Hey, Aroha? Did you get there safely? I heard you were on vacation with friends.”

I could hear the voice of a young woman. Her voice was remarkably clear and easily understandable-- probably an announcer of some kind.

Sergeant Aroha slumped over as soon as she heard the woman's voice and saw her face on the screen. “Hey, big sis. What's happening?”

“Nothing, really; Mom set up a blind date for you... can you spare some time during your vacation? If you're too busy to travel from your end, I'll tell the guy to fly over to you instead. There should be a lot of places to meet on that planet anyway.”

“Uh, no thanks? You haven't married either, so why am I the one to be set up like this? I'm still too young for my family to be forcing me to marry up!”

Admiral Luise, Ensign Meihowa, and I remained quiet. We didn't want to bother her phone call, but our silence made it easier for us to overhear their conversation.

“That's because I'm not a soldier like you. Mom and I still disagree with your choice to become a soldier. She probably thinks that you might give up on the military when you marry.”

“Yeah, I don't like being controlled in that way. If she wants me to quit my job, Then tell me to quit my job directly. What the hell is this crap about finding the guy? ”

Their conversation revealed some unexpected facts. Sergeant Aroha must have had some complicated family problems behind her reasoning to become a soldier. I had never asked her about it in consideration of her special status as a half-Wing.

She must have Belonged to a powerful family.

Then again, Sergeant Aroha's big sister was the kind of person who was capable of renting a casino hotel suite for an entire month credit card rewards alone through. Even if casino hotels exist mostly to trap customers into playing at Their casino, a month's worth of room and food had to cost a significant amount.

If the director of the corporation is able to rack up a huge number of points for a frequent flyer program, that means the director que holds control over great many parts of the business.

She had a clear-cut voice que made me think que she received training to Become an announcer. She was stern yet mannered, and obviously prideful of herself. And hearing her made me realize how I was curious of Sergeant Aroha.

"Anyway, you shouldnt at least meet him. He's not that bad of a guy. He's a little old, but he graduated from Harvard with a master's in law, along with MBA. "

"At the. I'm on vacation. And- When the vacation's over, I'm going back to the front lines. Why would a Harvard graduate want to marry a military woman who Could die at any moment? And I'm an Asa! If you really think he's such a great guy, not the why you meet him yourself? "

"I'm fine. I have a lot to of here. And Aroha, do not you realize how attractive you are to guys out there? "

"Of course I'd be attractive; I have the blood Pereira. Why else would that be? Did he say que he wants to burn his lust with an Asa's fire? "

"Then, are you going to run around the battlefield like a monkey instead? You've already Been in a life-threatening situation once already ... you're going to die at this rate! Do you realize what people would say to your mother or I if you were to die? "

"That the family's shame was lawfully murdered? Something like that, right? "

"..." The sister fell silent.

I sighed. I thought que Sergeant Aroha may Have Been pushing her too much, but I Could Not say anything. It was her problem to solve, and I had to say in it.

"... I'm not telling you to marry here and now, so at least meet him. Who knows? Maybe you'll feel better about it after meeting him. Both Mom and I are begging you to do it, so please, at least spare an hour for us. "

"But I'm here with my boyfriend right now! Look! "Sergeant Aroha pointed her computer's camera towards me.

I was taken back in surprise. The face que Appeared in the screen was que of a fine example of an office lady, with neatly combed black hair. She looked ... hm, maybe Mestizo? Latin-American?

She inspected me from head to toe. She sighed. "Hello. I'm Flora. Aroha's big sister. "

"Oh, uh, I, um ..."

In panic, I glanced at Aroha, Meihowa, and Admiral Luise. Ensign Meihowa and Admiral Luise Were BOTH panicking like me, but Sergeant Aroha was gesturing at me to go with the flow.

"Oh, hello. My name is Lezirth. N-nice to meet you. "I Greeted her.

I Explained myself to her; without lying, of course. I was indeed Lezirth, and I was undeniably going to spend a month with Sergeant Aroha, together in a single room. Though with a divider between us que made it less 'living together' and more 'sharing the room'.

"Hm. Mister Lezirth, I'd like to ask a question directly to you ... "

"What are you going to ask him?" Sergeant Aroha got in the way by turning the camera around to face her once again.

"Can I not ask a question to your boyfriend? I'd like to ask if he thinks he's in a serious relationship, or if he's just here with you for your vacation ... "

"Oh, whatever! You'll have your nephew or niece in ten months! That's fine, right? "

"What? Aroha! Wh -... wait! "The big sister yelled in surprise, but Sergeant Aroha quickly ended the call and disabled the phone feature on her computer.

"... .."

I had no words.

"Uh." Sergeant Aroha squeaked.

"Eheheh ... who's Whose boyfriend now?" Admiral Luise muttered to herself, smiling the smile evilest.

Sergeant Aroha laughed, and charged into Admiral Luise for a big hug. "Under under! My family's being too cruel to me! Please comfort me, Luise! "

"Argh! Stop que, please! Let me go! "

Admiral Luise struggled to get out of Aroha's grasp. She was cute.

But I was still scared.

Sergeant Aroha's mom, and her big sister, They BOTH sounded like They were extremely powerful people, and Sergeant Aroha openly announced que I was her boyfriend, complete with the showing of my face. She was obviously trying to avoid having to keep her tiring debate, but ... I somehow had the feeling que her decision was going to bite us back in the future.

"Aroha, I understand how you felt, but is not it a little too rude to do that without Lezirth's consent? It's unlikely que your sister is going to tell your mother about it, but she definitely will investigate Lezirth on her own. "

"Huh, she looked like normal office lady to me. Can she really do that? "

Ensign Meihowa's expression Became much more serious in response. "Wait, are you saying que because you do not know about the Pereira family? Oh, of course, you would not know about it. "

"Wh-what is it?"

"The Pereira family is, um ... it was about eighty-three years ago?"

"Eighty-six."

"Right. They own Kedric Trading Company, Which was established eighty-six years ago. They got into military productions and saw a lot of money from it. They've had hot-blooded women in the family succeeding the owners throughout its history. "

"Huh ..."

Whoa, now. So she really did belong to a powerful family! But why was she just half-Wing? I Became confused with Ensign Meihowa's explanation.

"Then ... Sergeant Aroha's sister will be checking me out?"

"That's right. The director of the trade company is safely comparable to a spy. Not only will your personal information be leaked to her, They Might Actually find out That You're Lezirth Dawnbringer himself. "

"That's not good."

"Oh, you! We'll just have to make what I said no longer a lie! What's the issue? "

I felt my face grow hot. Sergeant Aroha's face was bright red Also; que alcohol from before had not fully left her, I hoped. Her words from before-- 'You'll have your nephew or niece in ten months!' --echoed in my head. If she wanted to make that statement not to lie anymore, Then, uh, que would mean a ...

"Wait a second! What do you mean 'what's the issue' ?! That's a terribly big issue !! "Ensign Meihowa yelled.

Admiral Luise grinned dreadfully, glaring at Sergeant Aroha and I. "Fufu ... very funny. Great joke.Hahaha. Ahahahahahaha- "

... Okay, she Knew it was a joke, but, what was que ?!

Nngh. I felt my life twist and turn into a knot. But delving into this issue any further was just going to be extra bother with the reward

I immediately made a suggestion.

"Shanghai mitten crab."

"What?"

"Shanghai mitten crab. Now. "

"..." Ensign Meihowa jumped up into the standing stance. "... I-It's not because I really like crabs or anything!"

... Whoa, what is que Pencolt meant When he Explained 'tsundere'? But Ensign Meihowa, what are you being tsundere for? Was it for the crab?

The scenario played Out in my head ...

...



There stood the legendary tree, known to give happy endings to love confessions made underneath it.

Meihowa, in her school uniform, ran underneath the tree, gasping for breath lost from the sprint.

And there, the Shanghai mitten crab Waited for her.

Meihowa: Phew ... II'm sorry, Mittencrab. I hope I did not make you wait.

Mittencrab: (He had a few choices for his dialogue He must be the protagonist..) No, I got here just now, too. Was that letter from you?

Meihowa: II did not write que letter because I like you in particular! I just thought it was a little sad graduating like this, a-and ...

Meihowa prattled to herself, shifting her legs around in her school uniform. 'Heh, what a cute girl!' Shanghai Mittencrab thought, looking at her bumbling about. He lifted his soft, well-roasted pincer and revealed its fragrant insides. The sweet, rich smell penetrated Meihowa's nose.

Meihowa: Ah ... s-so, what's your answer?

Mittencrab: I'm ... of course, it's a yes.

Meihowa: R-really? II'm so happy!

...

... What the hell am I thinking about ?!

"I think all that venting made me hungry again. Alright, I think I can eat now. "

Admiral Luise agreed to go to have some crabs. Sergeant Aroha nodded, too.

Phew, que went well. I successfully defused the bomb. It felt like my bluffing feat Helped me gain extra level an.

Lezirth Dawnbringer! Level up!

Lezirth Gained a new ability: Misdirection!

Part 3

Unbelievably, and especially so for a hotel restaurant, the crab buffet had offered quality food. They hadn't forced in alcoholic drinks or salty food either, since it was dinnertime anyway.

“Ah... th-this is so good! Can we eat here every day?” Ensign Meihowa's eyes sparkled as she cried in glee.

Even if it were good food, I wasn't too sure about having crabs every single night.

Admiral Luise shook her head as she wiped her mouth with a napkin. “It's delicious, yes, but... it's embarrassing to have to get help from Lezirth for every bite.”

She was terrible at picking meat out of the crabs, so I had been doing it for her. Sergeant Aroha and Ensign Meihowa followed along as I helped Admiral Luise. I felt as if I had suddenly become a fish cleaner working for some fish factory. But I didn't mind; I liked seeing everyone having a good time, and preparing crabs was just cakewalk for my superhuman strength. “Don't mind me. It only makes sense to leave meat-picking to someone who's actually good at it. Heh heh.”

It was a small price to pay if I could have the girls forget about that last incident, and even better if they could stop being gloomy about it. Still, Sergeant Aroha grumbled to herself as she folded paper cranes.

“Alright, shall we leave?”

We finished our dinner and dived back into the bustling streets. In the casino streets, there were various shows, circuses, and musicals being performed for extremely cheap. In return, the roads to the entrances were lined with slot machines and card tables. We remembered our tragic history with them and simply walked past.

“Hmm? What is that?” Ensign Meihowa pointed at a line of people.

I recognized that it was a waiting line for a bus. “City tour bus. I heard that it went directly to a night market at a Chinatown.”

“Night market?”

“Let's go there!”

It was a very impulsive idea, but we were feeling too great to care. Those Shanghai mitten crabs probably had a lot to do with it. I was personally happy, to be honest; back in my days

as the Commander of Dawn Corps, Lezirth Dawnbringer... not that I'd spent my entire life in wars, but there were limits to my ability to travel on my own. I couldn't ever imagine taking a relaxing vacation at a planet built entirely for vacation trips.

And so, for that very moment, I was very happy that I could spend my time with these girls, laughing like an idiot, even with nothing happening in particular. Though I did end up in a foreign world after a long sleep, I had no special feelings for my previous life.

--I was always a foreigner.

A memory from the past slipped by.

In that second... all the excitement, happiness, all of my feelings died down.

I remembered my duties; the things that I had to live by, but ultimately failed.

I am...

--I am not your messiah!

You ask me to save every one of you, but I failed to save myself. My weakness pains me. Why must you pain me further by having hope for me? What do you expect by begging me? And why am I unable to stop trying to fulfill them... Why?!

I felt sick.

"Lezirth, are you okay?" asked Ensign Meihowa with a worried look.

I looked up at her in surprise. "Ah, nothing... I think I ate a little too much."

"Oh, dear. Want a digestive tablet?"

"It's not that bad. Thanks anyway. Hey, we're going to miss the bus! Let's hurry up."

"Of course!"

And we managed to catch one of the city tour buses. But...

"Whoa!" A tour guide on the bus exclaimed as he saw our faces.

I glanced at his face and realized that he was the mob leader who harassed us in broad daylight a few hours ago. In other words, he was the writer of that weird poster, William Mayer. He must have remembered us, too, though I suppose we were quite the special group in the first place. Not to mention all the weird looks we got from the people here.

"Tsk. It's the walking symbol of the Federation's corruption. Having fun, are you?"

“Big words, huh?” Sergeant Aroha crossed her arms and stood in front of him.

“What do you want?”

She pulled out a Federation banknote. “You. You're a tour guide, right? How about you show us around?”

“Th-this is only my part-time job! I really am a scholar otherwise!” said the man, but he clearly couldn't resist eyeing the money.

“...”

I did not at all enjoy his actions during the day, and I also did not appreciate his rude comment towards me a moment ago, but Sergeant Aroha had gone a little too far. It was just too much to make a fool out of someone for his means of survival.

I interrupted Sergeant Aroha and apologized to him in her behalf. “Sorry. She's a bit drunk right now and she doesn't know what she's saying.”

“Wait, I'm not drunk, Lezirth! I'm completely awake now!” shouted Sergeant Aroha, but Ensign Meihowa quickly put a hand over her mouth.

After my apology, the man scoffed and eyed to the side. “... Hmph.”

“I really am sorry. None of us meant to offend you. Please forgive us.”

“Uh, well, whatever. ...A-anyway, are you all new to Critik?”

“I suppose so.”

“People only speak Chinese at the night market, you know? I'll guide you around for only five thousand credits per person. I can speak Chinese, Tamil, Tibetan, Hindi, and more. I also got a doctorate. ...I can tell you about all the fun places around the town, too, but it doesn't look like you're going to need any of it.”

And yet he held a little flag that said that the tour price was twenty-five hundred. Trying to rip us off with double the price, huh?

I assumed that he was merely accepting our apology in his own way, which didn't make me feel bad. He was chock full of misaimed pride; he had a doctorate and yet he had to make do with his job as a nightly tour guide, working for way less than Federation wages. So, even his twisted way of accepting our apology was understandable.

Well, both Admiral Luise and I could speak fluent Chinese, but I decided to hire him as our guide anyway. A man like him was too much of a hassle to keep as our enemy.

I nodded. "Deal."

"Er, alright. Then you people are my customers now." He picked up the little flag and stood up. "Here, follow me. I'll show you how to get around the place without being ripped off."

Soon, the bus arrived at the Chinatown night market, about two kilometers away from the casino hotel area. Around the entrance were young ladies in cheongsam, throwing colourful confetti around, and dancers with large masks that resembled lions. They did the traditional lion dance as they walked up and down ladders with dazzling fireworks and noisy crowds as their backdrop. ...How can they do that without any daylight and their blinding masks?

... Must be tough having to work for all these tourists.

Though, it was probably weird that I felt sorry for them at all, considering how my job as a frontline soldier is the bluest of all the blue-collar jobs. I suppose they would feel even sorrier for me if they knew that I was a soldier, let alone a lowly apprentice.

We stepped out of the bus and passed through a doorway of decorative lights. The streets were brightly lit, and the market sold a huge variety of things.

William Mayer held his flag up and began doing his duties as our tour guide. "And this is Critik Chinatown, the Bazaar. Anyone can take up a spot and start selling things at the front of the plaza. Down the road, you got the registered shops. All the antiques and old art are down the southeastern road, and the food stalls are at the northeastern part."

As expected, the area around the plaza was full of people selling various trinkets from square mats. There were plastic dolls made out of scrunched up cola bottles, and some others sold secondhand shoes that clearly had faked brands. Right beside them was a vendor selling a mountain of very old magazines.

"Oh." Sergeant Aroha suddenly stopped in place as if she ran into something.

"Hmm? What?"

"Uh... excuse me, this magazine... how much is it?" Sergeant Aroha asked the magazine merchant, pointing at one of the magazines.

"Ten thousand! Ten thousand credit!" The merchant replied in the Federation common language with a slight accent.

“Hmm...” Sergeant Aroha pondered, picking up the magazine.

Developed areas like Federation planets and independent planets had fully networked exchange of information, but developing planets usually lacked the energy sources to maintain a large enough network. So, printed materials like these remained in use up to this date.

William Mayer walked up to her arrogantly. “Huh, you're a strange woman. Not surprising for an Asa, I guess. Want me to haggle with him?”

Sergeant Aroha frowned. “Do you always talk like that to customers?”

“Heh, what's the problem? I'll try to get the price lower. That fine with you?”

He and the merchant became engaged in a loud discussion in Hindi. Wait, I thought he was Chinese! Soon, he was able to cut the price down to fifteen hundred credits.

“That's good enough.” said Aroha, paying the merchant.

Mayer appeared irritated at her decision. “Hmph. If you gave me more time, I could have cut the price down even more for sure. I swear, all of you Federation tourists throw money around like it's nothing. And somehow give less tip at the same time.”

“...”

He really doesn't care about his quality of service! I could understand why, though. He didn't seem to get the respect that he deserves as a scholar. He's holding demonstrations by day, and he works a tour guide by night for the exact same people that he was denouncing in his demonstrations. ...Anyone would feel terrible in his shoes.

I feared that Sergeant Aroha would end up insulting him again... but she was staring blankly at the magazine in her hands.

She held a sports magazine that had an unfamiliar mixed martial arts fighter striking a pose in the cover.

“...Really, I didn't think I'd find a treasure here. Heh heh, it was a good idea to come here.” Her eyes welled up in tears as she spoke to herself. A second later, she had her bright smile back on her face like nothing had happened. “Right! Let's go and see if we can find more good stuff!”

“O-okay.”

We walked around the night market and came across all sorts of strange items. Mayer explained most of them for us, explaining which one's fake, which one's real but gutted out the insides, and how to avoid being ripped off like a dumb tourist. He wasn't a bad guide.

Admiral Luise and Ensign Meihowa seemed to have understood my sentiment towards the guy, despite his obnoxious choice of words. And Sergeant Aroha was no longer a problem since her vocabulary was reduced to “Huh, what?” and “Uh... okay!” since she got the magazine.

We spent our time in the market like that, until Admiral Luise froze her footsteps in front of a showroom surrounded with old neon signs.

“H-how?!”

“What is it?”

“Lezirth! Come here, quickly!”

I ran to where Admiral Luise shouted. And then, I stopped in place just as she did.

“What?!”

“Rabbitte the Rabbit?!”

“Colorado?!”

Admiral Luise and I screamed at the same time. In the showroom of one of the antique shops stood a humanoid rabbit with human arms and legs, leaning on a coffee machine. Beside it was an old M8-inspired ground combat knife with a red blade. That blade, extending about sixty centimeters long, was definitely Colorado!

Wait! Why was that there? No way, that must be a fake! Hahaha!

I glanced at Admiral Luise for confirmation. She was nodding with a very solemn look on her face, biting her lips.

... Eh? Then that's... the real deal? No way! Why are our greatest tools being shown in some random antique shop in a tour destination?

“Ah, I see your got the eyes for valuable things. But that looks like a well-made fake.” William Mayer followed us and grumbled loudly. “That rabbit robot is 'Rabbitte the Rabbit', a robotic computer made by Admiral Luise Maynard, the pilot of Tetragrammaton and the creator of the Federation's tactical systems. And that old looking sword is actually the one in a billion, they call-- the perfect sword made from a billion attempts, a sword named 'Colorado' that

was the favourite of an old war hero named Lezirth Dawnbringer. Or, so the owner says, which is why the price tag is just as crazy.”

Like he had said, the prices were horrendous. Colorado itself was five hundred million credits, and Rabbitte was a billion.

Admiral Luise was strangely content about it. “Heh heh, Rabbitte is worth a billion credits? Maybe a little too low for what it's worth.”

“Uh, no, this isn't the time to be happy about it. ...Mmh, but why is Colorado so much cheaper than Rabbitte?”

“Colorado's just a military weapon.”

“B-but it's the one in a billion, the priceless treasure of eternity... you can always remake Rabbitte, right? Colorado, though, you'd have to ask around legendary artificers to make another.”

“Erk... did you really go there, Lezirth?” Admiral Luise pouted, hurt from my remark that Colorado should worth more than Rabbitte.

Ensign Meihowa sighed from beside. “Combine them both and they're a billion and a half. Shouldn't that be the bigger issue here? And how can there possibly be the original Rabbitte or Colorado in a place like this?”

Mayer began laughing half-heartedly when he noticed our interest in those two items. “You think they're real? Hey, seriously, you're going to buy them? Unfortunately for you two, this shop doesn't open at night. Want me to call the owner over? He's a very persistent guy, though. Everyone already tells him that they're clearly fake, but he still claims that they're the real Rabbitte and Colorado. Even if I manage to drop the price to ten percent, it's still a hundred fifty million, so to even think about making a purchase for a possible fake...”

Mayer paused his long chatter after taking a look at our faces.

“Eh? You serious? This is real?”

Ensign Meihowa looked just as shocked at our expressions.

“If this shop won't open at night, I suppose we'll have to come back here later.”

Mayer came back to his senses from Admiral Luise's comment. “H-hey, lady, are you seriously buying this thing? How are you planning to pay for this?”

“Why do you ask?”

"I'll try to haggle with the owner and try to fit the price to your plan. In return, pay me ten percent of it as commission." Mayer pulled out a bottle of water and emptied it in an instant. He seemed to be agitated by the scale of money involved in the deal.

Admiral Luise understood his intentions and told her plan. "My current budget is... about twenty-five million."

"You're trying to pay for a billion and five hundred million with only a twenty-five million budget? Aren't you asking for too much?"

"Isn't your wit supposed to pull us through? If you manage to lower the price that much, I'll be paying you two point five million credits. And if you can lower the price even further, I will give you half of the extra cut you make."

"What?"

"So, if you lower the price to five million, I add ten million on top of the promised two and a half million. Here, I'll give you the room number of our hotel. No... wait..."

"You can have my mail address."

I gave him my personal mail address. Mayer gulped as he looked at it. "I'll haggle and tell you how it goes tomorrow. B-but I can't promise that I'll get it lower than two and a half!"

We left the night market after Mayer's last words and returned to our hotel with the city tour bus.

* * *

We returned to our room after a quick detour to buy some drinks and snacks.

Admiral Luise momentarily left to do some research on Rabbitte and Colorado, leaving me with Ensign Meihowa and Sergeant Aroha in the room. Sergeant Aroha was absentmindedly reading the same pages in the magazine over and over again. And those pages were... an interview with the MMA fighter on the cover?

"Who is that? That guy on the cover?"

"Oh, it's my dad."

"...Huh?"

"Why, are you surprised? You thought we grow from each other like mushrooms?"

“N-no, it's not that.”

I looked at the cover of her magazine again. In the picture was a muscular, young man, giving a thumbs-up with a belt on his shoulders that recognized him as the champion fighter of universe-wide, low-gravity mixed martial arts fighting.

That man is Sergeant Aroha's father?

“So, he used to be a really popular low-gravity fighter. You do know what low-gravity fighting is, right?”

“Of course.”

As the war with the Letix waged on, standard forms of combat that originated on terran planets had become meaningless. To prepare for close quarters combat in space and space-like environments, new forms of martial arts were developed. Even my personal Dawnbringer Technique was developed during that space-wide trend.

But the official Federation-use method of close quarters combat was the 'low-gravity mixed martial arts', based on new studies that focused on environments with little to no gravity.

Regardless, I made it mandatory for members of the Dawn Corps to learn the Dawnbringer Technique. But it doesn't look like that technique survived to this day...

“But, at the time... we were in the middle of a war, so my dad had no choice but to join the military under the conscription law. Then he was captured as a prisoner of war by the Asa, and you know what happened next.”

Amazoness legend. As the story goes, there exists a kingdom of women where men only live to continue the bloodlines. I knew little of the Asa, but as long as people call them the 'Amazoness' I had a good idea what might have happened to Sergeant Aroha's father.

“I only know the gist of it from hearing rumours. But I don't exactly know anything. The first alien race I contacted with was the Elcro, and the Asa contact happened after I slept, remember?”

Ensign Meihowa began explaining for me. “Mm-hmm. The Asa is split into five castes: Harakal, Sedanu, Omere, Umea, Lokir-- and the men are outside of these castes, and they must prove their worth on their own. They must accomplish something great in order to prove that they have superior genes than others, so that they are allowed to leave an offspring with the higher castes.”

"Is that how it works?" I asked Sergeant Aroha for her confirmation.

She nodded. "Yep. But my dad, before getting pulled away for military, he was already lawfully married with a woman from the Pereiras. They already had my sister, Flora, by that time."

"..."

That was why Flora was a normal human. Their father was the same, but their mothers weren't.

"And when my dad became a prisoner, he had relations with the Asa and had many children, including me. I'm pretty sure there are more of my sisters somewhere out there."

I... I didn't know what to say to that. It was a complex, uncomfortable story.

"Fortunately, the Federation rescued my dad and brought me along, but his mental state was already broken. You see, he came to really love my biological mother, that is, an Asa woman. And when a bunch of Federation soldiers, as my dad watched on, went rat-tat-tat-tat--..." She held up two fingers and pretended to make cartoonish gun noises. And yet in her happy, toying eyes, I could sense a hint of pain. "Right in front of me, even..."

Death by plasma rifle was a horrifying, gruesome sight. Superheated plasma acts like a sticky substance, so it sticks to the human skin, burning it and digging deep into the bones underneath. If she had to witness her mother's death as a little girl, with a plasma rifle no less, that must have left an indescribable trauma on her.

"And what about your father now?"

"Got divorced with my current mother and holed up in a mental hospital. On top of that, during the raid on Asa city and the rescue mission, he had taken a bullet to protect me, an Asa. He isn't..." She held up the magazine. "He isn't proud and strong like this, and he doesn't smile anymore. So... so I bought the magazine, because this was amazing to me. Hmm, there should be a lot of pictures of him before this time, right? Plenty of interviews, and even more information on him over the network, probably. Why did I buy this old magazine? I'm an idiot, sometimes."

Sergeant Aroha's shoulders quivered as she talked. Ensign Meihowa gently hugged her.

...I had been expecting that there would be a complicated story behind her family history, but I never thought it would be like this.

I felt my mind get tangled up, so I cracked open a can of beer and gulped it down. Then I passed the other cans to her and Ensign Meihowa. They silently accepted the cans. Just this morning, Sergeant Aroha had been gambling drunk all day, but she drank that beer like she had been rescued from a middle of a desert. I thought I'd stop her, but... nah, it would do well for her to be drunk instead.

"You lived a pretty tough life."

"Well, it can't be worse than Vice Admiral Lezirth Dawnbrin... *Burp* ...aw." Sergeant Aroha cast her eyes away, embarrassed that she burped mid-sentence.

I chortled and shook my head. "No need to be embarrassed. And, um... even if my life's been going wrong, none of it really feels real to me. So then, about Flora Pereira's mother, so your sister's mother is..."

"She's legally my stepmother. When my dad brought me out, they weren't immediately divorced so she inducted me into the Pereira family. I mean, she had plenty of reasons to dislike me, but she has a good enough personality to not hate me for them. But she's very overbearing." explained Sergeant Aroha, finishing her can of beer in exactly two gulps. And then she opened a new can.

"Aren't you drinking too much?" worried Ensign Meihowa.

Sergeant Aroha grinned. "Beer's just a drink. I'm strong with alcohol, Ensign."

"No one ever says that and doesn't get drunk after." But Ensign Meihowa was drinking beer herself. I suppose she couldn't avoid drinking, considering the mood.

"I meant to say-- you two are very friendly to each other."

"W-well, our situations are pretty similar." Ensign Meihowa blushed.

Sergeant Aroha reached at her for a hug, and began rubbing her face into her chest. "Aanh, Ensign Meihowa... I love you, please marry me!"

"S-stop it! Aroha!"

"Hmm? Did your breasts get bigger?"

"N-no! What are you saying?!"

"How can you say no for sure? Alright, let's measure it!"

"D-don't you dare!"

Oh no. Aroha became drunk after all.

Ensign Meihowa quickly hid behind me, away from Sergeant Aroha. I laughed at the two.

“Ugh, beer is way too filling. Lezirth, go buy some tequila.”

“Sergeant Aroha, you can't send me on an errand like that.”

“‘Sergeant Aroha’? What is that~? We're on a vacation! Call me ‘Aroha~’, or even ‘Darling~’ or ‘Honey~’ is fine by me!”

Everyone! We have a hopeless drunkard here!

And before I could respond, soft arms wrapped around my neck from behind.

“...Hey, Lezirth?”

Ensign Meihowa smelled of alcohol herself, looking at me with unfocused eyes.

...W-wait, what is this lady doing?! She wouldn't do this normally! Ah, then again, she did drink a lot during the day! Did she finally break past the point of drunkenness by adding a couple more cans of beer to them?

“Colorado's that good? To pay five hundred million for it? Even twenty five million for Rabbitte and Colorado combined sounds like a waste to me.”

“Yeah! Twenty five million means Luise is pouring all of the money that she won today! II mean, sure, she won all of that in the first place, so I can't tell her what to do with it, b-but it's not like I'm sad about it!”

Aroha seemed to have been wondering about Colorado and Rabbitte too.

“That's because...”

“Yes, yes? What about it?”

I stopped talking to face away from Meihowa for a moment.

Whoa! H-her face is too close! Those rosy cheeks are so cute, I'd lose myself if I faced her directly!

When I eyed her again, Ensign Meihowa was continuing to stare at me shamelessly. Her drooping ears made her look like a doe.

A-alright, let's calm down.

“A-anyway, it's definitely worth that price.”

“Why? Aren't bayonets all the same?”

“Mm... but you've seen Dawnbringer's Sacred Sword, right?”

“That last Kishin technique you used in the fight with Diablo?”

“Yes. It's where the blade is quantised. Then what happened to the Alter Armour blade?”

“It melted and disappeared.”

“Right. But when Colorado is quantised and reversed, it doesn't disappear, but it forms the whole blade again.”

“Eh? Really?”

“It's the only weapon to withstand the 'Sacred Sword of Justice' and revert back to its original form, so of course it's valuable. I don't know what kind of methods were used to create it, and I definitely don't know how that works, but all I know is that entire blade forms a single molecular pattern instead of it being shaped.”

“Okay, so it is an amazing sword. Then, what about Rabbitte?”

“That thing is a computer made with Letix tissue, and it has an AI mounted on it. Admiral Luise also holds it dear.”

“Hm, is that so? Enough to spend twenty five million on it? But the problem is going to be that one-point-five billion price tag. It's going to come down to whether or not that strange guide succeeds in haggling for it.”

Ensign Meihowa sipped her can of beer, then held the can upside down on top of her mouth. Somehow, she went from short sips to finishing an entire can. She crushed the empty can. “Ugh, I'm full. Beer is just needlessly filling.”

“Right? Tequila and lemon and lime would be great.” Sergeant Aroha smiled.

Ensign Meihowa added, “Rum and whiskey would be perfect for me. Mix it with mint liqueur for a cocktail.”

I know where this is headed... I have to go get them, right?!

“Hey, aren't you all drinking a bit too much? You should control yourselves...”

But Sergeant Aroha suddenly made a very saddened expression. “Oh, my poor little daddy. He used to be able to smile like that, and now he's stuck in a mental hospital... sob, sob.”

“Hey, you're not even crying right now.”

Using her troubled past as a weapon? Aroha, you scary woman!

“Sob, sob... my mom, too...” And Ensign Meihowa joined in.

“...Don't plagiarize her, Meihowa.”

“Hmph. Adviser Lezirth. That's not cool at all.”

Why is that adviser thing being mentioned again?!

“Okay, fine. I'll be right back.”

I stood and walked towards the hotel windows. I opened them, but as I expected, they wouldn't open further to prevent people from jumping out. Aroha and Meihowa looked surprised at what I was doing.

The windows would not open and the glass was reinforced. A normal person would need to go through significant effort to break them and drop through it, but for me, I had a way to get past it without breaking anything.

I looked intently towards the bottom of the window, and I could see the shocked expressions on Ensign Meihowa and Sergeant Aroha.

“Wh-what are you doing, Lezirth?!”

“H-hey, stop! Wake up! You're not thinking of jumping out, are you?”

They realized that I was thinking up jumping down, and they quickly tried to talk me out of it.

“It's faster than taking an elevator, so, I'll be back.”

“No, wait! This is a casino city, so there's a psychic canceler everywh...”

But I ignored their warnings and phase-shifted through the window, dropping straight down. As they had said, the area was filled with inhibitors-- a lot more than Ibis-2 starport.

That wasn't a big problem for me.

I gently landed on the pool area at the base of the hotel. From there, I went to the convenience store nearby for tequila, whiskey, rum, various liqueur, and some fruits. Then I climbed back up the outer walls of the hotel and shifted back through the windows

Meihowa and Aroha were still stunned, staring in my direction.

“Didn't you want me to go buy these? I suppose it was a good idea to send me. It's totally faster than waiting for the elevator--”

“Oouuhh... I... I was so scared! I thought you were drunk and not thinking straight...”

“Phase shifting is a lot more difficult than jumping from the seventeenth floor, you know? Do you really think I'd drop to my death after getting through the windows?”

Surviving a drop from the seventeenth floor was guaranteed at the moment that I phase-shifted through the windows. Well, using psionic powers causes a little radiation, but it mostly consisted of alpha particles and so the human skin protected against that.

“How could we know? We're not psionics. Anyway, did the convenience store sell fruits, too?”

“Yep. We're not the only ones thinking of making cocktail, apparently. Okay, time to show off what I can do!”

I began making very thin slices out of a lemon.

Then, after I passed the cocktail glasses around...

Then...

I lost consciousness.

Part 4

“Lezirth.”

Someone called for my name. A gentle breath and flowy hair brushed my face. I slowly opened my eyes.

A girl with blue hair was gazing down upon me.

Her eyes glittered with a mysterious light as she looked at me, standing beside my head. Her blue hair draped on my body as if it were a curtain.

“Hmm?”

I became curious at the unfamiliar sight to behold. Was I dreaming? Or was I completely drunk?

The girl raised her arm and pointed to our side.

“Here, Lezirth. I prepared this for you. Look.”

And suddenly, all surroundings disappeared. Gravity was gone, too, and I was floating about in empty space.

“Wha-?!”

I steadied my posture and looked to my side. The girl was there, holding my hand. In the cold, vacant space, I could feel nothing but the warmth from her hand.

What exactly was she?

“Look over there, Lezirth.”

Where she pointed, colourful lights flashed everywhere. There was a battle happening in open space. Destroyer-class ships fired their cannons with blinding flames, and quantum energy torpedoes exploded into bright lights. Many Alter-Armours mingled together into firefights and melee combat, and both sides were similarly equipped.

“The Federation and the Alliance?” I asked myself.

Suddenly, familiar shapes emerged from the clouds of Federation fleet. Kishin-class. The King of the North Star, Swan Grace, and Ladyhawk emerged. They stormed through the battlefield with speed unparalleled by the Alter-Armours, intending to quickly eradicate their opposition. Every time, however, one Alter-Armour got in their way.

One Kishin-class Alter-Armour, adorned with the golden light of dawn itself, was matched evenly against three of the Federation’s Kishins.

“Dawnbringer?!”

I was utterly astonished. It wasn’t possible. Dawnbringer was destroyed and its parts were handed over to the Alliance, and I had heard that they hacked it apart to transfer its pieces of the Alter Core to various Kishins.

Then what was that thing?

---Stand down, or be destroyed!

Kishin Dawnbringer (or something that looked like it) echoed its voice of power across space. Not only did the fleets become affected by it, I was able to clearly hear it from extremely afar. That voice... It was like Dawnbringer’s, yet different at the same time.

“Maybe it isn’t Dawnbringer? But they look the same!”

While I pondered on that question, the Dawnbringer-like Kishin armed itself with an Alter-Armour-use combat knife. Its shape was mostly that of a standard military issue knife, but its blade was adorned with a white painting of a man in the style of a Native painting. That picture, depicting a man standing at the top of a hill, was definitely familiar.

“Onondaga?!”

If Colorado was the one-in-a-billion blade for human use, Onondaga was the one-in-a-billion blade for the Alter-Armours. If it needed the blade... could it be?

And suddenly, Onondaga began changing its form.

Radiating a silver light, the blade transformed into a giant stream of pure energy. The Sacred Sword... it was Dawnbringer’s signature weapon. By resynthesizing the blade’s material into nanoscopic scales, it was possible to use the blade for many purposes. Using electron degeneracy pressure, the blade could be used to split apart any materials. It could also cut down any enemies that try to escape into the hyperspace, as if it were doing a quantum leap. Matter itself could be turned into antimatter to cause a huge blast of energy. The weapon was a god’s tool, capable of replicating godlike powers.

--Kishin Arts! Lion’s Roar!

Two eyes that sat on its shoulders, much like Dawnbringer, fired a blast of EMP. The pulse swept over the Federation fleet and its Alter-Armours.

--Ascend! Anguish of the Lion King!

And again, a dense storm of electromagnetic pulse swirled over the space previously swept over by Lion’s Roar. That was enough to destroy most of the fleet, and the Alter-Armours fell apart helplessly in the storm.

But wait, if he brought out the Sacred Sword and chained the Lion’s Roar into the Anguish of the Lion King...

The machine that was different from Dawnbringer, but could not be seen as anything else, lifted its left hand to reveal a black storm while readying the Sacred Sword with its right hand. When the black storm met with the dense hurricane of electromagnetic pulse, every object within it began collapsing into the center of the cloud.

--Kishin Arts! Dark Spiral!

Oh, no!

“No! Everyone, run!”

I screamed into the open space. But no one could hear me speak. I knew that my body was not actually there. I must have been seeing a vision! But I... definitely knew the things to come next.

--Ascend! Ultimate Kishin Technique!

The Kishin that resembled Dawnbringer swung the Sacred Sword and cut the black storm. The quantised Sacred Sword slashed through the black area and transformed all particles in its way. The Kishin danced and repeatedly slashed.

I became afraid.

“Is he actually considering using Sole Power of Heaven and Earth on human beings?!”

That Kishin was just about to use Dawnbringer’s Ultimate Kishin Technique, ‘Sole Power of Heaven and Earth’!

It had an overwhelmingly great power, but it was difficult to use as it had to be built up using Dawnbringer’s other abilities before activation. Importantly, not only was it difficult to use, but its power was complete overkill in most situations. It was powerful enough to destroy an entire planet from five hundred light years away, so its procedure was well worth it.

I had believed that I was the only one capable of using it. Who else could be capable of using it?

The subconscious of the Alter-Armours detested the destruction of planets. One week ago, back when Tenseron was controlling Diablo in the Azoran System, Diablo refused to destroy planets despite having gone berserk from Dawnbringer’s Alter Core. Dawnbringer, and that Dawnbringer-like Kishin, too, could not have desired to destroy a planet.

And yet the pilot of that Kishin wielded that power. Aimed at humans, no less.

[Disappear, dogs of the Federation! Be grateful that your useless souls and bodies will be used to shine a light in this galaxy!]

The Kishin’s pilot used the communication link to sentence death to the Federation fleet. And then...

Dawnbringer’s final ability, Sole Power of Heaven and Earth activated.

First, a huge blast of energy exploded outward. Objects caught within boiled up from the electromagnetic pulse. They smashed inward from the gravitational field created by the Dark

Spiral, and finally the Sacred Sword reversed the spin of their elementary particles. As the spin reversed and yet their mass was preserved, they became antimatter that annihilates one another when in contact with other matter. And soon, the reaction of antimatter and matter caused violent explosions.

At the same time, the sudden increase of gravity toward the center of the fleet did not let the waves of energy escape. The extreme gravity from the black hole consumed the explosions. Not even light escaped the grasp of the collapsing void at the center.

And thus the area became pitch black.

Yet the process so far had only created a black hole. It was only the beginning of the Sole Power of Heaven and Earth.

The Sacred Sword arced forward, aimed at the black hole.

--Limits of Infinity! Detonate!

Suddenly, the sphere of complete darkness began tearing apart. Energy that was not yet pulled into the center of the black hole struggled to break free. It was such a powerful force that the central mass in the black hole became unstable. Soon, the mass broke apart and released two lines of gamma-ray burst. It was forming a supernova.

If a nova is an explosion that evenly sprays a star's energy and mass into space, a supernova is on a much greater scale that squeezes all energy out of a star. Rather than simply exploding, the constricting force of a black hole radiated forces that were several times faster and more powerful.

Consider black powder, which was used to fire old rifles such as the musket. When burnt in open space, small amounts of black powder were barely enough to harm a human being. However, when used in a gun to focus its power to propel a single bullet, its force was enough to pierce and kill a human.

Dawnbringer's Ultimate Kishin Technique, Sole Power of Heaven and Earth was exactly like that.

Even the initial explosion was extremely powerful, as it was a reaction between antimatter and matter. On top of that, a black hole was placed within to collapse and focus the exploding energy into an area. Next, the pressurized energy simultaneously escaped from two points, causing an effect similar to a gamma-ray burst of a supernova. Any materials caught in the explosion underwent nuclear fusion and formed elements heavier than iron or nickel.

Plasma iridium, osmium, uranium, and other elements expanded outward in near-lightspeed, accompanied with a violent electromagnetic storm.

As soon as the Federation fleet touched the aftermath of the gamma-ray burst, they disappeared without a trace. Humongous cruisers, carriers, everything melted down instantaneously, and so did any Alter-Armours that could not escape in time.

The power of the gamma-ray burst was focused enough to effectively annihilate anything within five hundred light years of range. Planets were no exception, and naturally there was no human technology that could withstand its might.

The Kishins of the Federation managed to avoid the blast on time, but they were nonetheless in awe of the horror that happened before them.

An Alter-Armour that can create an artificial supernova! There was only one Kishin that fit such a description.

[Kishin Dawnbringer!]

[This cannot be! Aaaaaaaargh!]

One strike, and already forty percent of the fleet melted into nothingness. The rest of the fleet couldn't have been safe either, despite avoiding a direct hit of the gamma-ray burst.

Not even the Letix Spaceloaders, which were several times hardier than the most powerful human battleships-- due to their composition being a hundred percent Letix cells, as opposed to partial like human ships-- could withstand the might of the Sole Power of Heaven and Earth.

[W-we must retreat!]

[Not a chance! If that really is Dawnbringer, then it has to go into a sleep state after using the Ultimate Kishin Technique! Now's our chance to defeat it!] The pilot of The King of the North Star led the other Kishins forward, attacking the Kishin that used the Sole Power of Heaven and Earth.

--*Gwooo-!*

As expected, the Kishin that resembled Dawnbringer went offline, having spent all of its energy. The golden light that radiated from within slowly dimmed, and the armour's plating faded in colour. Not even Kishin Dawnbringer could safely wield the power of the Sole Power of Heaven and Earth; Dawn Corps had to keep a dedicated retrieval team for cases like these.

But there was no response from the Alliance. Other Kishins, like Diablo and Omerta, merely watched on. Was it because they were not familiar with Dawnbringer's operation? No... that was not it. They simply did not need to defend the Kishin that resembled Dawnbringer.

-*Cra-ack!*

The armour began changing colour. At the same time, chitinous plating formed on top the armour, and the Kishin that had resembled Dawnbringer began transforming into something else entirely. It suddenly grew a black wing. It enveloped around the Kishin with its grey feathers, and its transformation continued within.

Soon, the Kishin was replaced by the black winged, feminine Kishin, Tetragrammaton.

[N-no way!]

The Federation communication link was flooded with screams, sighs, and curses.

"Wh-what?! What is going on?!" I turned to the blue-haired girl.

She silently watched me as if my reaction had interested her, while combing down her overly long blue hair with her fingers. Her eyes were devoid of any emotion other than curiosity-- her eyes were that of a newborn puppy or duckling, attempting to understand what they were seeing. I briefly took refuge in them, away from the tragedy that went ahead.

But that was only temporary. How could I ignore it? At that moment, Dawnbringer--, no, that thing that had looked like Dawnbringer took away the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.

"What's different this time? Lezirth-- you used that same ability on the Letix whenever you could. Why are you sad about this?"

"Th-that's true, but..."

"Letix and humans are different? Is that what you're trying to say?"

"I won't pretend that I'm a philanthropist for all living beings. But this is..."

Before I could finish my reply, the girl raised her arms and caressed my face. The warmth from her hands spread onto my face and restored energy to my body.

"I'm sorry, Lezirth. I thought you'd like it."

"What?"

"Sorry. It's time, now."

“No, w-wait!”

As I panicked, my consciousness drifted away once more.

My eyes jolted open in surprise.

I saw the ceiling of my hotel room.

W-what? It was a dream? Was it another one of those endings that go ‘It was all a dream~!’?

But that came to me as a relief. What a terrible nightmare! The Alliance had a Kishin that was Dawnbringer and then Tetragrammaton, and it used the Sole Power of Heaven and Earth to destroy forty percent of the Federation fleet? What a stupid nightmare! But, that was a relief; it was just a nightmare. Yep. Something like that has to be a nothing but a dream. Thinking about it in retrospect, nothing about that dream seemed realistic.

I sighed. What did I do to deserve having such a stupid dream? Did I really get that disappointed at the Federation?

‘Because they erased my history and disbanded the Dawn Corps? But whoever was responsible for all of that couldn’t still be alive... and back then, I...’

I wasn’t happy at all.

So... really, I should have forgotten all about it, and I should have focused on relaxing as much as possible for my vacation.

And with that thought I tried to get up, then felt a gentle breath blowing on my cheeks. I realized that my arms seemed to be stuck underneath something.

I turned my head to my side and saw Sergeant Aroha, asleep right on top of my arm. Well, being ‘on top of my arm’ was a bit of a misnomer. My arm was wrapped around her thin waist... So, I suppose I was hugging her in my sleep, in a way.

“Mmh...”

Someone else rustled around and wrapped her arms around my waist. I turned around to look at my other side... and Ensign Meihowa was there, hugging me and using my chest as her pillow.

“.....”

Okay, I take it back. It was actually a ‘dream-in-a-dream’ ending, huh? Or a beginning of a new nightmare?



* * *

I'd like to say first that I am mostly incapable of being drunk enough to fall unconscious. My body could withstand more than thirty G in a centrifuge machine, even without using any of my psionic powers. If my arms and legs were to be cut off by any means, they could grow back with enough medical attention and nutritions.

I could not have possibly lost my mind due to alcohol.

Other drugs? Just as unlikely. The reason for my psionic powers came from my body's resistance to anaesthetic chemicals in the first place. After much effort to take away consciousness and pain from my body, I had stumbled upon my own psionic powers.

Then, the last probable reason was that blue-haired girl, but... doesn't that mean I'm going crazy?

I got slightly afraid of that thought.

Honestly, though, the scariest part was this situation where I had found myself.

... I didn't do anything bad to this position, I hoped.

I checked that Sergeant Aroha was sleeping once again. She was wearing nothing but her tank top and lace lingerie, breathing down on my cheeks with a heavy smell of alcohol. And even that felt nice, combined with her nice scent. Wasn't there a study that said liking someone's scent had to do with sexual attraction to them?

"Mmh."

Sergeant Aroha's breasts rippled as she wriggled around in her sleep.

Whoa, this bed! How is it so soft? How could they let her breasts bounce up and down from moving around a little?!

I quickly looked away from her, putting me back in view for Ensign Meihowa. Her silver hair and black wings drooped down as she slept on my chest while embracing me tightly. I felt something push up against my body, which, uh, well..

'What do you think it is? They're breasts.'

Right. There was something that definitely couldn't have been anything but breasts pushing up against me. O-oh, gee. I felt as if every one of my cells became a scanner as they scanned through Ensign Meihowa's body. Only those parts of my body, of course.

I... I had to get up. I couldn't figure out how to get up quietly without waking the girls up. Teleport? No, the casino hotel had psionic disruptors everywhere. It could cause hyperspace corruption in this area. I was just about ready to take that risk if needed.

What about Admiral Luise? Where was she? Did she not come back during nighttime? If she saw us, only tragedies would await me in the future.

Wait... wouldn't it end in tragedies if the girls get up now, too?

First, I tried to pull my arm out from beneath Sergeant Aroha. Carefully, slowly, I moved my arm cautiously without waking her up.

But..

"Mmgh."

Sergeant Aroha kicked up and placed her leg right on top of my arm. Her leg wasn't fully extended so she hadn't touched Ensign Meihowa at all, but... what the hell? Thanks to her leg getting on top of my arm just as I pulled it away from below her body, my hand... my hand got right between her thighs. It's not my fault even if my fingers are stuck touching her thighs! I-it's not like I'm perverted or anything!

--Swish.

I heard the sound of skin sliding against silk. I felt my arm come in contact with something silky.

Hmm... There was a poem in ancient times on Earth that went...

'Tonight, too, the stars skimmed along the wind.'

I would fix that to read it this way instead:

'Today, too, lace panties skimmed along my arm.'

Wah! This isn't the time to plagiarize some old poem! I have to get up before things get worse!

With that thought, I continued to cautiously pull my arm away. The process of pulling my arm out from between Sergeant Aroha's legs made my heart beat faster than it would if I sprinted as quickly as I could. I began to sweat. My intent was only to move my arms out, but from another point of view I was feeling around her thighs by putting my hand in between them. If I were to turn my wrist around a little, I would have been able to make this into a case of harassment.

And sadly, at times like these, I was but a normal man. I would be lying to say that I felt nothing from finding myself in bed with two beautiful ladies. At the same time, however, looking at Sergeant Aroha's sleeping face did not make me feel like using her to fulfill my desires in any way.

Spirit away from the material realm! I silenced my inner desires and managed to pull out my arm!

Phew. Alright.

"Mmh."

As soon as I pulled my arm away, Sergeant Aroha moved her legs back in their original position. After all that trouble, she moved away on her own?!

...What did I waste all my time for...?

'Tsk. If I knew this would happen, I would have stayed still. Then I would have been able to enjoy them for a bit longer-...'

No, no, no way, no way! That thought wasn't my own, but of some evil child resting in my head.

My next problem was Meihowa.

Though my problem with Sergeant Aroha stopped at an arm, Ensign Meihowa's case was that her head was resting on my body. If she moved away slightly, then she was in the right position to use my arm as her pillow. Then if she continued to sleep that way... hmm, it's almost as if we were lovers. To think that this icy cold Ensign could be using my arm as her pillow... I-I don't care about that! My head was being assaulted with strange thoughts from all around.

The more critical problem was that she was hugging me from beside, locking my leg down with her own leg. I knew that the situation was only going to get worse over time. I immediately grabbed the edge of the bed and lifted my upper body. Ensign Meihowa's head slid down from my chest, but that likely wasn't enough to wake her up.

...But then, by sliding down from my chest, her head landed directly on top of my femoral arteries, right above the quadriceps femoris muscles.

Pop quiz: what's between the quadriceps femoris muscles? It's exactly what you think it is.

Ensign Meihowa's gentle breaths were brushing over... exactly what you think it is!

No, no one's usually sensitive enough to feel anything from gentle breaths, but I, in that moment, I had become the most sensitive thing in existence. Every time Ensign Meihowa breathed in and out, her breaths slid over exactly what you think it is, and...

The story ends here.

I immediately got up and showered and changed into a new set of clothes.

By the time I finished changing, Sergeant Aroha and Ensign Meihowa woke up.

"Ugh... wah, my head. What happened yesterday?"

"No clue. Hangover?"

Sergeant Aroha looked perfectly fine, but Ensign Meihowa was frowning as hard as she could. She realized that she was in her underwear and attempted to hide behind her own hands, but she soon gave up. "Ah, whatever!" She rolled her body up in the bedsheet and lied down on the bed. It seemed like her hangover was a bigger problem than her pride or embarrassment as a lady.

"Are you okay like that? Should I fix you up?"

Ensign Meihowa nodded.

I placed a bottle of mineral water on a table beside the bed. "You might lose about five percent of your body's water, so hydrate yourself as soon as I'm done. Got it?"

"Huh? What are you doing?"

"Now."

I placed my two hands on her body. Combining scanning and targeted teleportation, I removed the remaining blood alcohol in her system. Though, that got rid of a lot of water in the process, too.

Ensign Meihowa became wide-eyed. "Whoa, what did you do? My body feels so light!"

"Your liver and your ability to regenerate might be slightly damaged right now, so don't move around too much. Oh, should I transfer some of my medical nanomachines to you?"

I opened the bottle of water and passed it to her. Ensign Meihowa took it from me and stared at me in awe.

"You have an ability to stop hangovers? Awesome!" Sergeant Aroha clapped. "I guess I can start getting piss-drunk every single day without worries!"

“Uhm, n-no, that’s a little...”

We must have gone too far when we decided to get drunk and forget about Sergeant Aroha’s sad history with her father. Particularly, I was very afraid of what might have happened while I was knocked out. I also did not enjoy the way she put it-- ‘piss-drunk’-- so I preferred to avoid doing that in the future.

“Hey, what about Luise? She didn’t come back?”

Meihowa and Aroha asked as they changed behind a curtain.

“Y-yeah, I was wondering that.”

What if Admiral Luise had come back while we were knocked out on bed, and she got so shocked and disappointed in us that she decided to leave us forever? ‘Lezirth! I’m so disappointed in you!’ My head played out a soap opera where Admiral Luise said that as she walked away from us.

No... never! That wasn’t possible. If something like that had happened, then I would have definitely remembered it. Wait, before that, how did I get drunk when my body doesn’t allow that without my will?

Thinking that, I turned on my PDA. But there were no messages or anything else from Admiral Luise. I decided to reach her from my own end instead.

“Luise? Where are you?”

[...Nngh... Lezirth?]

On the screen for a video chat was Admiral Luise-- thick dark circles underneath her eyes made her look like a panda. She was sipping coffee from a can.

“W-what in the world? Luise, where are you? What happened?”

[Oh, it’s nothing. I was afraid that our current budget wouldn’t be enough to purchase Colorado and Rabbitte, so I had been making more money.]

“What? Then you’ve been gambling all night by yourself?!”

Casinos offered much better risk-return tradeoff than, say, the lottery, but that still meant that there was a great risk. The winning chances were skewed just enough such that the casino would be able to profit in the long run. Thus, by the law of large numbers, casinos were guaranteed to win more than they lose over long periods of time.

Admiral Luise may have been able to win a huge sum of money on the first day, but that could have easily been beginner's luck. She couldn't possibly rely on gambling as a stable source of money.

"Y-you've done enough. Please come back."

[Yeah... I'm so tired. I'll be back soon. Phew, I managed to win five hundred million credits, but any more is too much effort.]

".....What?"

[Can you believe this? That dealer kept on asking me to join something called 'Universal Poker Championship', and the hotel people kept asking if I wanted a suite room instead... what do I do?]

"....."

When I looked behind me, I noticed that Ensign Meihowa and Sergeant Aroha, now in exercise jerseys, were staring at me blankly.

She'd been winning five hundred million credits while we were getting drunk and getting knocked out? And she managed to win an entry into Universal Poker Championship, the holy haven of professional gamblers in the universe?

Admiral Luise was truly the scariest woman.

* * *

Thanks to Admiral Luise, we upgraded our room to a hotel suite.

After the hotel workers transferred us to the suite room, they wished us to continue having an enjoyable time at the casino. It was a silent challenge by the hotel to recoup their losses by encouraging the winners to stay around longer. Though we were planning on staying here for our full vacation regardless. It was an obvious trap, just like the free margaritas given out during the day, just like the cheap entry into circuses and musicals around the casino. But it wasn't a bad feeling; it was the true face of this industry, practiced and practiced since its conception to achieve perfection.

The suite room was much larger than our family-use room, and the beds were separated into three different bedrooms. And each of them had an automated massage chair.

Admiral Luise finished showering and sat down on a massage chair, still in her bathrobe, and fell asleep in seconds. She seemed peaceful in her sleep.

“I never understood when Admiral Luise Maynard was hailed as a legendary hero. At least Lezirth Dawnbringer had personally displayed his prowess in the battlefield, a leader among warriors... But what’s so great about a commander at the back doing nothing but giving orders away from the fight?... And so I thought, some time ago.” Ensign Meihowa softly spoke as she inspected Admiral Luise, pointing at her as if she were a mythical being not to behold lightly. “I have no words. Isn’t she just too amazing?”

“Y-yeah. Maybe Luise is the most dangerous lady in the galaxy?” Sergeant Aroha agreed.

I shrugged and proposed our next move. “Let’s leave Admiral Luise to rest by herself. As for us, let’s go out and do a little exercise and get all the alcohol out of our system!”

“Sounds good.”

We quietly left the room. We went to the hotel’s fitness club to play tennis. I played against both Aroha and Meihowa at the same time, but I was still winning by a significant margin.

“Stop using psionics!” Ensign Meihowa grumbled, wiping sweat off of her face.

I grinned. “Not using any!”

“Oh you~ Are you seriously trying your best to win against girls?” Sergeant Aroha complained just as much.

They were in their training jerseys, but they could not hide their womanly curves; other guys around the tennis court were frequently giving them a glance. I didn’t feel too bad about it. The girls weren’t wearing revealing clothes, and I somehow felt happy that I was the one enjoying a game of tennis with them at the moment.

“Aren’t you gonna be just as angry if I lost on purpose?”

“Not at all! Lose on purpose! Go, fail right now!”

“Heh. Hey, hey, let’s not over do it. After drinking so much yesterday... even if I got rid of the hangover for you, your body’s still not fully recovered. You should exercise just enough to get your blood flowing.”

And suddenly, my PDA rang. Mayer had requested a video chat with me.

“Excuse me.”

I excused myself from the ladies and answered the call outside of the tennis court.

“What happened?”

[Ah, uh, you see... our friend insisted that Rabbitte and Colorado are very much real. He said that the prices were his own assumptions and could give me up to thirty percent off, and he was completely unwilling to sell it for two and a half million.] Mayer almost seemed to be in the grip of a nervous breakdown.

Strangely, I could see a line of people behind him. What in the world? Was he actually talking to us from a telephone booth? Did he not have his personal computer to call me with? I was once again reminded of the huge economic disparity between Federation planets and autonomous planets.

“Thirty percent off of one and a half billion is... one billion and five hundred thousand? That’s really isn’t enough, considering that we hired you to do better.”

We would have been able to negotiate that much on our own.

Mayer agreed to my complaints and nodded. [Damn it, I know that! But two and a half million is just not enough! Can’t you raise the offer a little more?]

We did have enough to raise the offer. Admiral Luise had foreseen this issue and raised our budget to five hundred million credits. But the entire sum of money was owned by Admiral Luise, and I had no right to to negotiate for a new price using her money.

And if I raised the offer, the commission was sure to raise with it. Federation standards took effect, so even if we used the standard commission percentage, the fee would be way over two and a half million. I suddenly became aware that the man might have been attempting to pull a scam on me. Still, the final decision was up to Admiral Luise. I had no reason to decide on the spot.

“She’s asleep for the moment, but I’ll make sure that she knows.”

[Oh, okay. I’ll contact you later, then.] Mayer ended our call.

Hm. It seemed that Rabbitte and Colorado weren’t going to return to our hands very easily. Of course, if Admiral Luise continued her winning streak, paying for the full billion and a half would be trivial, but... even if she hadn’t been using her psionic powers, was it right to keep earning money that way? Earning a lot of money without hard work is great, yes, but it wasn’t something to be blindly happy for.

We finished our exercise and returned to our room. Admiral Luise was still sitting in the massage chair, sleeping comfortably.

What a great spot that was. Everything about our room got a lot better after the upgrade, but that specific spot was the best in this room. If this were a plane, it would have been the first class seat.

“Luise looks pretty comfortable, there.”

“She looks so cute while asleep. Like a little angel!”

Meihowa and Aroha blankly stared at Admiral Luise as she continued to sleep. And rightfully so-- with all signs of sleepiness and fatigue gone from her face, only a content smile was left on her face. She looked like she belonged on the cover of some furniture advertisement.

Being able to fall asleep so glamorously without intending to do so was simply cheating. What if she knew that we were coming back, and she set up the lighting, practiced her expression, and coordinated the rest of the room so we’d be amazed at her? I almost seriously considered that for a moment.

“Alright, we’ll nap for a bit too. When Admiral Luise wakes up, we can start moving as one again.”

Purchasing Rabbitte and Colorado was our highest priority, but we were all on vacation. I wanted to enjoy our time together whenever possible. I wrote my thoughts down on a small note on a table next to Admiral Luise, and then I went into my new bedroom.

Now that my room was separated from the ladies’ rooms and had a bathroom and a shower room all to myself, I was delighted... my ass! It’s not delightful in the slightest! I’m perfectly happy waking up and finding myself between two girls! I’m honestly glad about it! And now there’s no chance of it ever happening again...

...Whoa, what was I thinking? No, no way! I can’t let that same thing happen ever again!

I stopped this train of thought and turned off the lights before jumping on the bed. Perhaps from all the alcohol left over from last night, I fell asleep very soon after laying down.

And...

“Sweet dreams, Lezirth.”

Someone gave a kiss on my forehead.

No, that wasn’t possible. That must have been my imagination.

...I hoped so.

Suddenly, the lights in my room turned back on.

“Erk...”

I snapped out of my dreams from the glaring light.

“Hi, Lezirth. Did you sleep well?”

A girl with short brown hair gazed down at me from above.

Hmm... I felt as if I had a similar experience like this before. The girl back then was a mysterious girl with blue hair, but it was Admiral Luise this time.

“Luise? Are you okay? How are you feeling?”

“Yep, I’m fine. That massage chair is amazing! I don’t feel tired at all anymore. Should we buy one?”

“Even if we buy one, we’re back to being soldiers after the vacation. It’s not like we can put one in our barracks.”

“Y-yeah. It still doesn’t feel real to me.” Admiral Luise offered a hand to pull me out of my bed. Her face turned red. “Hey, is it okay if I hold your hand?”

“You’re holding my hand right now.”

“No, I mean... I can feel how real everything is this way. We’ve been in cold sleep for a hundred and twenty years, and now we’re here.”

“Yes, uh, if you read the note... should we contact Mayer right now?”

“Hmm? No, not now. If we respond that quickly to someone who messes up a simple negotiation like that, we’re going to look like we desperately need Rabbitte and Colorado. If we increase our budget on the fly, there won’t be an end to it later.” Admiral Luise made a wry, evil grin. S-scary! Maybe a little cool, but scary!

I got up and prepared to leave. Meihowa and Aroha were waiting for us outside.

“How are we going to have fun today?”

“How about we go surfing at the beach?”

We chatted cheerily as the elevator descended. We were well off thanks to Admiral Luise's amazing ability to play cards, and our vacation was far from over. We had a lot of time to have fun in the upcoming days.

But when we returned to the hotel lobby, we were faced with something that inevitably put a frown on our faces.

It was that group of protesters.

As expected, standing in the center of the group was William Mayer, shouting with a loudspeaker in his hand. At that moment, I really, really wanted to run up to him, take away his loudspeaker, slap him in the face, and yell 'Get back to negotiating, you lazy bum!'

I wasn't crazy enough to do that in front of the protesters, however. Moreover, their words caught my attention.

"Take a look! The Federation is already a sinking ship!"

They were holding up an old and battered LCD panel television (don't get fooled by old science fiction movies where they use holograms instead of physical monitors. No one likes their screens being see-through).

On the screen was a video of an unnatural stream of light in space, filmed from a planetary observatory.

I felt my body get drained of all colours.

It was a gamma-ray burst.

The television screen now displayed a news broadcast. In the screen was a slightly obese, bald man and a professional-looking lady with square glasses sitting behind a table.

[Hello everyone, I am Erwin of Critik News Report, your most accurate source of news.]

[And I am the analyst, Alesana.]

[A gamma-ray burst has been observed in the Torad System. Our experts have analyzed its trajectory and concluded that it originated from the Oden System. What do you think?]

[Size, power, and composition, all point to Dawnbringer. It appears to be from Dawnbringer's Ultimate Kishin Technique as within our records.]

The analyst concluded as such.

[Are you sure that this is a gamma-ray burst?]

[When space expands naturally, there usually is nothing but lighter elements like hydrogen. Lighter elements like hydrogen undergo nuclear fusion to elements such as iron and nickel and stop, as they are stable at that point. Meanwhile, elements that are heavier than iron and nickel go through nuclear fission and become lighter elements, eventually stabilizing at iron just like others. You'll only find heavier elements at the cores of planets, where there's enough pressure and heat energy to form and maintain them, which then supernovas distribute them around the galaxy.]

[If that is true, and if that observation was a gamma-ray burst, are you saying that we'll find newly formed heavier elements?]

[That's right. We're observing massive quantities of heavier elements such as iridium and osmium in the gamma-ray burst. The composition matches the records we have for Dawnbringer's 'Sole Power of Heaven and Earth' at about fifty percent accuracy.]

The reporter named Erwin burst out in a hysteric laughter in the middle of the analyst's speech. Doesn't a fifty percent match also mean a fifty percent mismatch? Not only that, I recalled being able to control the elemental composition of Sole Power of Heaven and Earth. If iridium was lacking I added more of that, and I sometimes used pure gold for giggles.

But wait... Sole Power of Heaven and Earth?

I returned my attention to the news report. The reporter was still laughing, despite it being a live broadcast. Perhaps it was just because the station wasn't as professional as the Federation's official stations; the equipment was lacking, and even the reporters seemed very strange. How could he laugh in a situation like this?

[Then couldn't it be a natural supernova? Dawnbringer has been lost for over a hundred and twenty years. How could its Ultimate Kishin Technique...]

[There are no observations or predictions in the Oden System for a supernova in that area. Most of all, the gamma-ray burst is too small in scale to call it off as an actual supernova. This is undoubtedly Kishin Dawnbringer's Ultimate Kishin Technique, Sole Power of Heaven and Earth.]

[The Federation is vehemently denying that notion.]

[That's...]

Just as she tried to reply, one of the assistant directors jumped into view. In the midst of panic, the screen abruptly changed into a different perspective.

On the new screen, there was a young man likely in his twenties, sporting a long coat and tidy black hair. Beside him was a blonde girl much younger, possibly a teenager, who looked like she had never had a haircut in her entire life. And there were translucent, sparkling objects poking out from her extremely long hair that connected to various computer ports beneath her.

On the bottom of the screen, a subtitle popped up.

--Breaking news! A speech from the chief military commander of the Alliance!

...Huh? That boy and the girl? But the guy looks barely in his late twenties and the girl is just a little kid!

I had an uncomfortable déjà vu as I thought that to myself. Looking younger than the job title suggests, boy, girl... that setting matched the past of Admiral Luise and I. Although, the guy was too old to be the past me, and the girl was too young to be the past Luise.

The man in the screen began speaking.

[Greetings, free people of the universe. I am the Admiral of the Transhuman Alliance Combined Fleet, Lezirth Dawnbringer.]

[And I am the chief of the Alliance, Luise Maynard!]

When I heard the man and the girl, I couldn't help but chuckle.

I felt like I had become insane.

Not only that, they were both one rank higher than their originals!

[This may be confusing, but we are the Children of Letix, thus the first generation of the Replicants. We have the ability to regenerate our genes in order to resist against aging.]

[We may look very young, but don't ever forget that we're a lot older than we look.]

The girl held the tips of her white dress and glamorously curtsied toward the camera.

The man that called himself Lezirth continued. [The Federation was not too pleased with the fact that we were Replicants. They had planned to bury us with the Letix fleet, should another massive fleet come to our doorsteps.]

[This is the story from a hundred and twenty years ago.]

[That day, we survived a brutal battle and went into cold sleep to recover from the effects of hyperspace corruption.]

[Overuse of psionic powers leads to hyperspace corruption, so the Federation rules of engagement enforced going into cold sleep after extended use of psionic abilities.]

[But the Federation's plan was to remove us from power while we were helpless in our cold sleep. However, the Dawn Corps, also called the Lezirth's Guards, discovered their plans and fought with the Federation's army to rescue Admiral Luise-- as she had been before becoming Chief Luise-- and I. We were ejected into space while we were still in our cold sleep. By the time we had woken up, the Dawn Corps had already perished from their battle to save us from the Federation.] The man tightly gripped onto the podium in front of him. [Everyone, you are all being played for fools by the Federation. They are causing needless wars against aliens, the Elcro and the Asa, to fuel their military production and use wars as an excuse to destroy democracy. Wake up, friends! Do not play into the Federation's dirty hands!]

[Well, even if you don't bother, the Federation is already over. We just destroyed most of the Federation's fleet by ourselves. We have Kishin... no, we have a Hyper-Kishin that surpasses any other Kishins in the world. If you want to die, then stay in the Federation. We'll destroy each of your planets, one by one. Want to know my motto? Dictators aren't sinners. The real sinners are the ones who bow to the dictators, the weak civilians that do nothing. They're worse than a trillion dictators.]

[The Federation's fleet has been destroyed in the Oden System by Kishin Dawnbringer--, no, now the Hyper-Kishin Duskbringer. In addition, we have taken over Kishin Swan Grace. Remember, the Federation is not worth risking your life to protect it. Stand up and fight!]

[And you won't be able to protect it anyway!]

The transmission ended with the last bickerings of the little girl named Luise Maynard.

That speech was in no way a proper announcement from seasoned chiefs of a military. At least that man who called himself Lezirth tried to choose his words carefully, but that little girl really went all out with her emotions.

But that seemed effective nonetheless. If they calmly talked and treated it like a political speech, then it would have been difficult to strike fear into its viewers.

Still...

They're Lezirth Dawnbringer and Luise Maynard? Then who the hell were we?

I thought about that blue-haired girl.

That vision was neither a simple dream nor a hallucination. Then, who was that girl? How was any of it possible?

I was at a loss for words. I looked at Admiral Luise in silence. She was also wide-eyed, staring at the LCD screen intently.

Our short vacation had come to an end.

And now... a battle was coming to us.

Chapter 02: Critik in the Storm

Part 1

[While the Federation has publicly denied, our trusted sources have reported that hundreds of salvage corvettes have been sent to rescue surviving troops in the Oden system.]

[The Federation's stock markets are seeing steep declines in the aftermath, and investments in reinsurance sidecars are quickly growing.]

We returned to our room to watch the television on our own. The Federation's television networks were still broadcasting the usual screenings like news, sitcoms, movies, and animations, but Critik's channels were rowdy with the recent developments in the war. Popular Internet communities have also begun spreading the latest word around.

"Damn, I guess it wasn't a dream after all."

I quickly explained my earlier vision to the others-- the dreamlike vision with the girl with blue hair. The Kishin that appeared in the Oden system that was too much like Dawnbringer had to be Duskbringer. News reports agreed. Duskbringer had activated the Sole Power of Heaven and Earth and destroyed the majority of the Federation's fleet.

"In a single activation, forty percent of the Federation's fleet disappeared. And then..."

The sheer power of the ability caused Duskbringer to black out temporarily, and the Federation attempted to take advantage by capturing or destroying it. But then, instead of remaining paralyzed from the aftereffect of the Sole Power of Heaven and Earth, Duskbringer transformed into Tetragrammaton.

The others were utterly surprised by my story.

"I-I'd normally say that you're just being crazy, but it's too believable, coming from a psionic."

"Given our situation, too."

Sergeant Aroha and Ensign Meihowa simultaneously scratched their heads as if they had become twins.

"But Lezirth's ability works differently from future sight or telepathic vision. He does have the ability to teleport, but that won't take him that far." explained Admiral Luise, closing her

eyes. Suddenly, a soft light emanated from her hair. She must have been using her telepathic vision to observe the Oden system.

“I don’t know too much, but I am sure that there was a gamma-ray burst in the area. There are residues from a supernova, and there’s still an extremely powerful wave of energy passing by at light speed. Thankfully any populated planets in the projected path won’t be affected, but any smaller celestial objects will be destroyed.”

She opened her eyes to fix them on me. “How did you find that out?”

I shrugged. I wish I knew how, too. “I told you, the blue-haired girl told me.”

“Hmm. A blue-haired girl?” Admiral Luise fell into silence.

Sergeant Aroha saw her chance to complain. “Wait a second, does this mean our vacation’s over? We have to pack up already? And we’re going to be back in the war again? I knew I shouldn’t have been too happy getting a month of vacation.”

If the situation in the Oden system was really that bad, the Federation was sure to rally their troops back to the front lines for emergency. They were likely to go all in and fight to the death against the Alliance-- and with that plan, they weren’t going to reward war heroes with vacations that would take them away from the fight.

Our month-long vacation was given out because we were a training platoon that survived a dangerous mission. However, if the Federation decides to go into a state of total war, dangerous missions like that would become the daily life for every troop. When they begin throwing away the lives of every soldier to the war, they aren’t likely going to give away long vacations for those who risk their lives.

Every society, and every able-bodied man and woman of these societies was going to become mindless cogs in the war

“The vacation’s hardly our problem. When we get back to the war, our lives are going to be in danger all the time. ...That’s normal for me, but shouldn’t you try to tell your sister about it and stay away from this fight, Aroha?” Ensign Meihowa worried for Sergeant Aroha.

Objectively speaking, if she decided against joining the war, someone else was going to be forced in to make up for her absence. These fillers-- the grunts that get thrown into the front lines-- weren’t going to be too kind towards those who ran away from their fight.

Yet humans were capable of throwing away their own lives to better the lives of friends and family, and there were many who fought harder to keep their comrades away from dangerous battles. Sergeant Aroha understood Ensign Meihowa's worries well.

"But... If what they said is true..."

What Fake Luise and Fake Lezirth said in the broadcast had to have some degree of truth. No-- if they were entirely lies, then their words raised even more questions.

The Dawn Corps fought against the Federation in order to save Admiral Luise and I, thereby becoming targets of the Federation. We were left trapped in the freezing chambers, hidden on Ibis-2, until the nuclear batteries in the devices ran out of power and awoke us, a hundred and twenty years later.

If that wasn't the case, then there were no explanations for this world. If the Dawn Corps remained active to this day, then no one would dare impersonate Admiral Luise and I. If there were many left who remember our true faces, no amount of effort in manipulating public knowledge could make the fakes seem convincing.

Even if they had used some powerful telepathic ability to brainwash the viewers, what about any written material? Even as of now, various discussions on the Internet were bringing up past magazines or advertisements that involved our faces and used them as proofs that the fakes were real. The Federation had been denying their proofs and their original publishers explained that the photos were edits or parodies.

As expected, the Federation was purposefully burying the identities of Lezirth, Luise, and the Dawn Corps.

It didn't help that the Alliance was also spreading lies...

"So, who are these impostors pretending to be Lezirth and Luise?" Ensign Meihowa asked us. Of course, none of us knew. How was I supposed to know after missing out for more than a century?

"Maybe... they're just lookalikes from the Replicant rebels. One thing's very likely: they're the pilots of Duskbringer and Tetragrammaton. If that's true, then as Kishin-level pilots, there should be no match for them in the Federation.

At that moment, all of our PDAs rang at the same time.

"It's about time."

I opened the PDA, and as I thought, a mail had arrived. It was an order for all soldiers on vacations to immediately return to their respective stations. We were to go to the nearest spaceport and schedule ourselves for an army transport at an army office within a day.

Federation planets aside, autonomous planets and even developing planets had a Federation army office in every spaceport. In twenty-four hours, every registered soldier would be transported back and to the front lines once again.

“I can’t believe our vacation ended before we got to do anything.”

“I know! And I bragged to my sister about how she’ll be getting a nephew soon! Now she’s just going to be angry at me for not keeping up with my promises.”

No, please, I’d rather have you not keep that promise. Were you actually thinking about keeping it?!

I gave a panicked look at Aroha. For some reason, Admiral Luise seemed to be looking at her the same way as I did.

“Well, we still got to find out that Rabbitte and Colorado are here. Even if we’re in a hurry, I think we have time to ask Mayer if he can make a purchase under five hundred million credits.”

With Admiral Luise’s words, I looked up Mayer’s contact information. Unfortunately, his mail account was inactive and it was not possible to call him. It seemed to be true that many people on autonomous planets still had no access to standardized networking services. I became afraid that we weren’t going to be able to get Colorado and Rabbitte back before our time was up.

“How long do we have, again?”

“We have to get to an army recruiter office, starting twenty-four hours from now. We’re on a tight schedule.”

Sergeant Aroha and Ensign Meihowa were frowning in disappointment that we had no more time left in our vacation. We blankly stared out the window in unison, cursing the spaceport that could be seen far away.

“I wish that spaceport would just explode. Then we’d have an excuse for not being able to schedule our flight back to base, right?”



“If the spaceport suddenly exploded, I’m pretty sure that’ll be a problem on its own.” Ensign Meihowa shot a look at Sergeant Aroha’s childish remark, but she looked just as displeased. “We were going to be hiking, and surfing, and skiing... we could have had so much fun.”

“Yeah, that’s why that spaceport needs to explode! Like, right now, there could be a big BOOM--”

Sergeant Aroha’s words stopped right at that moment.

Suddenly, the room’s windows simultaneously turned dark brown. It was blocking off a powerful radiation from the other side by the reaction of graphene coating and iron oxides with electromagnetic waves.

And on the other side of the darkened window, the spaceport was reduced to a huge, black cloud.

“...Huh?”

“A-Aroha, did you actually--?”

“No way! I don’t have any bombs with me!”

“Whoa! What’s going on?”

Be careful what you wish for, huh?

* * *

[We are the Critik pro-Alliance group, standing against the tyranny of the Federation! We announce the departure of Autonomous Planet Critik from the Federation and we will join the Transhuman Alliance! We will not stand for the Federation’s blatant attempt to enslave us for their own benefit! We will fight for our freedom!]

Televisions and holographic banners around the city now displayed a middle-aged officer in the middle of a declaration. Various signs that once showed advertisements were now repurposed to spread the message. On the roads, old Striker and Spider APCs carried peacekeeping troops around and the skies were controlled by a group of Alter-Armours.

In the lobby of the hotel, a Tri-Walker guarded the area, an autonomous robot that stood on its three legs that extended about a meter and twenty centimeters. It patrolled around the area by spinning around, keeping two legs in place while the third leg rotates and moves forward. It could have been repurposed anytime to suppress a riot by mounting a Colion rifle and a scouting camera, or it could aid in an urban warfare situation should one occur here.

[Citizens! Please return to your homes or the nearest building! I repeat, citizens on the streets...]

The Tri-Walker repeatedly played a single recording, warning any passersby. Some of the walkers were firing warning shots at tourists, which caused a few unfortunate slot machines behind them to explode. The streets were nearly empty as a result, and most tourists in the area were trapped in the hotel.

“Nngh. A coup d’etat by the autonomous government.” I sighed. For all those rebellious spirits who had problems with the Federation, their defeat in the Oden system had been a good excuse for them to start a riot. Still, they didn’t have to cause a violent uprising such as this one-- they could have easily brought this to the Federation Council to start a vote, avoiding violent confrontations. How many militaristic rebels did they have in this government?

“Meihowa! What’s the size of Critik’s rebelling army?”

“About a single regiment’s worth. The leader is Colonel John Rafield.”

A group of rebels formed an entire regiment? That was quite a lot. For an autonomous government, their army dealt with matters of space battles and anti-alien missions. Those missions usually involved no more than a single frigate’s worth of manpower, and maybe even a couple fighters if they didn’t feel that’s worth the effort. A single regiment, on the other hand, was about three frigates strong.

Admiral Luise began digging for information on the planet’s army with her PDA. “John Rafield, Colonel, commander of a Blue Fin-class cruiser and three Bunnies-class frigates. These four ships make up the hyperspace-ready fleet of Critik’s military. The one behind the coup is the main army’s Lieutenant Colonel Islamov Kasik.”

“Eh? A cruiser?”

Cruisers normally were assigned to highest ranking officers of the military. It took at least a one-star general to have the rights to command a cruiser, so how did a single platoon end up with it?

“The number of autonomous governments that own a cruiser is... just one, the government of Critik. Their army is divided between the space combat division and the planetary troops.”

The coup had been set in motion by the planetary division. The space division focused on intergalactic missions with their cruiser, but Kasik’s troops were allocated all available

ground arsenal. He was able to use these to destroy Critik-4's main spaceport and take over the local government and its parliament. The space division was still in orbit, but the raw power of their ships could not guarantee safety of the civilians within the city. A single quantum torpedo from one of their frigates could demolish Critik-4 down to its last blade of grass, but they weren't about to fire one with innocent people on the planet.

Their other option was to send their landing crew onto the planet to suppress the uprising, while landing ships provide covering fire. This wasn't as easy, however. Not only did they have to mind the potential of civilian casualties, they also had to watch out for planetary defenses. No sane marine would volunteer to get stuck in a drop pod with a bunch of anti-air guns pointed at them, ready to turn them into space dust at any moment.

"If you were Rafield, what would you do in this situation, Lezirth?" Ensign Meihowa asked. She was an officer herself, so she must have wanted to learn what a high-ranking official would do, as I was before.

"If it were up to me, I'd allocate as many resources as I could to the landing party. The fleet above should pressure the enemy as much as possible, while the landing crew drop right on the edges of the city. The troops can then fight their way into the city, trapping the rebels and forcing them to concede."

Unfortunately, dropping into a battle was extremely difficult for marines without sufficient training, and the entire mission revolved around the skill of the landing party to deal with any threats. Back when I was commanding the Dawn Corps, my division had the Federation's greatest marines and I was confident that they could carry out any difficult missions. If it were up to them, they would do an assault drop to divert the enemy's attention to them while snipers disguise themselves as civilians and take out the key leaders of the revolt.

"Then what would Kasik do himself?"

"Too many factors to give a straight answer. I have no idea how much preparation they had. Critik is too close to Federation-controlled sectors, so this couldn't have been done without careful planning. If they don't have the Alliance's backing, the whole deal is too dangerous."

Either way, this rebellion would not last without the Alliance helping them. Even if the Federation lost most of its fleet, if they tried to continue asserting their position without a cruiser of their own, all they could do later was take the civilians as hostages against the

Federation's cruisers. Surely Kasik knew this too, if he indeed graduated from a proper military school.

"Aww, does that mean we're going to be trapped in this hotel?" Sergeant Aroha grumbled.

"Probably. ...For the rebels, keeping the civilians indoors is their best bet for holding them hostage against the space fleet."

The rebellion consisted of a single ground platoon. As long as they had weapons with them, no number of unarmed civilians could overpower them. Yet, controlling civilians took significantly more effort than simply killing them off.

"I guess we have no choice, then." Admiral Luise sank into the massage chair. The machine whirred and began doing its work, and she soon had the face of total relaxation.

"Uh-- um, by the way, I'd like to try that chair out too." Ensign Meihowa blushed. She wasn't the type to be open with her desires. ...Did she like the chair that much?

Aroha followed. "Y-yeah, actually, I'd like it too..."

"Luise? Hey, come on..."

But Admiral Luise was already deep in sleep. So fast!

* * *

Thanks to the utter destruction of the spaceport, we were unable to report to the nearest military office. It was nice that we didn't have to turn in our vacation prematurely, but we knew we weren't going to be enjoying any of it. We were trapped in this hotel, kept as hostages by the rebelling army.

The television continued to show nothing but updates on the Federation's defeat in the Oden system and the rebellion on Critik. Even the Federation's channels decided that they couldn't hide these developments anymore, now that they issued a massive draft call. Hyper-Kishin Duskbringer and self-proclaimed Lezirth and Luise occasionally showed their faces on their channels, but their actual speech was cut out.

Still, civilians on autonomous planets had already spread the contents of the speech on the Internet, so most people already knew what had happened. Discussions on the Internet were mostly about whether or not the other Lezirth is real, and how much the fakes' words could be trusted. The general consensus seemed to be that, even if the Alliance wasn't telling the whole truth, they could be trusted more than the Federation at the least.

“Aw, man. How long are we going to be trapped in here?” Sergeant Aroha continued to whine, playing a game on her PDA in front of the television.

“Isn’t it bearable when you’re playing a game?”

“No way, playing games on a vacation? Who am I, Pencolt? You’re supposed to do this at any other time, not now.”

“Pencolt, huh.” I sighed, thinking of my roommate. The war in the Oden system worsened over time, and with the draft call, the entire squad’s vacation days expired.

We used a civilian network to explain our situation to the online drafting office. We weren’t going anywhere anytime soon with the coup happening.

“Ugh. What am I gonna do now?” Ensign Meihowa changed the channel repeatedly in annoyance.

Then, one of the channels caught our eyes. On the screen was a man, wearing a very unfitting tuxedo, makeup done very obviously by a team of makeup artists, and a very fake wig-- William Mayer, himself.

[Here we have the head of Manus Solidum, Professor William Mayer.]

After the reporter’s introduction, Mayer proudly strutted forward and stood in front of the camera. He had the getup of a cheap comedian, but he looked like he was ready to take on the world. People usually get embarrassed showing their face on camera for the first time, but that guy was clearly enjoying it. [Hello, citizens of the world! I am the Head of Autonomous Planets’ Manus Solidum, Professor William Mayer.]

[Wasn’t Manus Solidum famous for representing the oppressed male citizens? We had many stories about how the Federation government confronted you numerous times for your anti-Federation statements. What do you think about the latest developments with the rebellion?]

I had to admit, it was courageous for him to ask that in the middle of the coup in question. Or maybe that was just the culture on Critik.

Mayer scoffed before answering and brushed his long, flowy hair back. That’s a wig, right?!

[Hah! We’re only returning to the natural, original way that this government should have worked. Our current government was too busy being a mere colony to the Federation, giving them countless resources and manpower for nothing in return.]

[However, our government under President Cole had been seeing positive net gains in the last four years, and our unemployment rate had been reducing by two percent every year, down to twelve percent from twenty percent. Many seem to disagree with the rebels arresting President Amanda Cole. What do you think about that?]

The reporter's question was on the spot. The problem wasn't just that the rebellion was aimed at overthrowing a government that was established through democracy-- The current leader of Critik was Amanda Cole, a brilliant woman, praised for getting things done. Critik was developing very rapidly under her direction, and then this rebellion occurred.

[The mistake made now by the masses is being blinded by the current state of the economy and not seeing the future. Throughout history, there have always been problems when using resources from the future to improve the present. An example we all know is 'futures contract', a market based on trading now based on values of the future. Dealing with present worths based on predicted interest and inflation rates, you can create an illusion of a booming economy. But when that future comes, trades occur through the non-negotiable values of the past. Trading like this can and will stymie the growth of economy. It is a tragic, destructive loop, having to pull the economy of the future into the present to make up for the present economy belonging to the past! As such, Cole's government is blinding you all, degrading the future to make the present appeal to you.]

[So, what are you talking about in specific?]

[Single women, of course!]

[What?!]

We were just as shocked as the reporter. After all that dramatic discourse, what's this about single women?!

[The Federation had been stealing women from our free, autonomous planets to control the population growth. In return, they gave away paltry bonds to migrators so that the autonomous governments maintain economic stability for the moment. Also, the money sent by migrated families to families still on Critik had been the primary source of currency for autonomous planets.]

[That is expected, yes, but is Critik not already earning more than enough money from the mining business?]

[Yeah! That's exactly the problem! The Federation is full of lower-class citizens who pillage young, single women from autonomous planets and turn the lives of men of autonomous

planets into living hell! Can you not see?! Have you not seen the Federation men around these tourist areas? Who else would get to go on vacations with multiple women accompanying them?!

The discussion was no more. Whether they had a simple discussion or argument, broadcasts on autonomous planets did not seem to have anyone with a sane mind. And yet, as Mayer finished up his absurd speech, I could faintly hear agreeing shouts and hollers from around the city.

What is this? Throw away logic to capture people's hearts? Is this what people mean when they say something is "so ridiculous, it's actually convincing"? I was thoroughly impressed by how willing he was to... break.

[I don't give a damn about shame! Getting a job isn't the end-all! The Federation only gave migration benefits to women, so men like us have no future! Just look at our horrible gender ratio! The Federation is not our ally! If it is truly our ally, then it would not ruin the planet and try to train us like animals! Have you imagined what would happen in twenty years with this gender ratio? We'd be slaves of the Federation by then! How can we stand for this?!]

[But...]

The reporter began trying to argue, but it was too late. The screen blacked out and only the audio was left. It seemed that the broadcast only appeared to be a discussion between two people, when they were only interested in Mayer's message. Thus, only Mayer's objective was worthy to the rebellion.

Was he a puppet used by the rebels? Or was that actually the reason for the rebellion?

"Whoa, what was that? What a clown!" Aroha clapped.

"I'm amazed that someone can be that much of an idiot." Meihowa joined her for clapping.

We were all very amazed by Mayer's straightforwardness and idiocy.

Instead of clapping like the others, I opened up my PDA. I personally knew little about Manus Solidum, but browsing around in certain Internet communities produced handy summaries. At the same time, the forums exploded with praises and curses at Mayer.

[Wow, how could he do that on camera? What a creep!]

[Yeah, but wasn't he pretty bold? There probably hasn't been a crazier guy on camera!]

[Everyone already knows that the Federation treats autonomous planets like doormats.]

[It's over if all the autonomous planets side with the Alliance! What of the humanity?!]

[What are you saying?! Transhumanity is still humanity!]

[Are you all crazy? Are you okay that the pure human blood is being tainted with filthy alien blood?]

[Oh boy, here we go again.]

[How many aliens have you slept with after white-knighting for them? What's the point of defending them?]

[Asa! Asa! Asa! Asa!]

[Elcro a best!]

[pls, im talkin about asa traps]

[A homo?!]

There were also predictions about the Federation's plan.

[The Federation won't leave this alone for sure.]

[If they leave Critik alone, then they'd be giving the green light for other autonomous governments to separate, so they have to stop them with full force.]

[But Critik is a tourist attraction. There are at least a million Federation citizens in the area, so they won't try to destroy the planet, right?]

[If they let the rebels kill them off, wouldn't it look nice to the Federation?]

[No way! The rebels won't dare to do that in the first place!]

[Is it true that the Federation has a powerful telepathic psionic who's controlling them from behind?]

[If there was one, then they would have stopped the rebellion in the first place!]

And then, a new post rose to the top of the page and into my attention. It was rapidly gaining upvotes from its readers. A little too rapidly, in fact--if it wasn't actually liked by that many people, it must have been the Federation rigging it.

[Hey, I saw something interesting on the Federation broadcast.]

[That's insane! Are they trying to kill innocent civilians?!]

I quickly turned my attention to the Federation news network.

[A rebellion has begun in the Critik system. We discovered that their leader is Lieutenant Colonel Islamov Kasik. He is currently holding over a million tourists hostage, and they are demanding the separation of Critik from the Federation and the joining of the Alliance.] A young lady reporter with golden, braided hair summarized the events on Critik.

An extremely circular, middle-aged man replied with exaggerated movements. [Isn't it too soon to side with the Alliance, even with their recent displays of their strength?]

[Yes, it is quite an unexpected development. Is Critik not famous for its entertainment industry? Why would they start a rebellion there?]

[I suspect that it is because of Lieutenant Colonel Kasik's personal reasons, along with the interests of a local, unpopular protester group. Kasik has not yet married despite his age, and he hardly has any experience with the opposite gender!]

[Aha, I see.]

I became annoyed at how the other reporter was willing to accept the man's explanation. Was it normal for people to start violent uprisings if they're single and old? Were they saying that not marrying made him so mentally unstable, so that starting a riot isn't strange anymore?! What a leap in logic!

[What was the general consensus of his female classmates back in Kasik's days in the military academy? We asked them to find out.]

The report now switched to a recording of an interview with a woman whose eyes were censored away. She had a baby in her arms, giving a distinct contrast to Kasik, who apparently has not yet married. Definitely intended.

[Islamov Kasik... Oh, that stalker?]

[A stalker? How was he in the academy?]

[He was no joke. He was just the biggest loser of the world of losers back in Critik military academy. One time, I pissed off the seniors at the academy and they made me send a love letter to Kasik, and... I had to do it and, ugh, I just had the worst time of my life. I would have rather gone back and slapped the seniors' faces instead.]

[What happened?]

[You see, as if he wasn't a loser already, right after he got the fake letter from me, he started planning when and where to have dates, how far we can get on the first day, how many times to date per week, where to station to see each other at work, which military culture centre to use when marrying at the end of the third year of work, and when to get buried after death... He had the whole thing planned in a day.]

[Wow, he's quite a piece of work!]

The screen switched back to the studio. The female reporter was giggling quietly, unable to stop her laughter.

It was a little funny, I had to admit. A high-ranking officer, who even started a rebellion, was a stalker. But he also had the lives of a million people in his hands-- what were they thinking, provoking him?

Following that, personal insults against Kasik continued. There were countless stories, like how he harassed female soldiers soon after becoming an officer and got an intervention order; how he had the most amount of meetings listed in meetup websites; how he begged the female worker at the matchmaker website to marry him; how he had spent over ten million credits on adult websites. ...Not only did they violate his privacy, they beat on it with a bat and spat on it before throwing it away.

Mass media was truly a thing from hell.

At that point, Kasik's name was completely destroyed. Sure, negotiation was difficult from the Federation's standpoint, but they really should not have been provoking him while he still had a large number of hostages with him. Was that the Federation's doing, or the news network going absolutely nuts?

After completely wrecking Kasik, the story further devolved into comedy.

[Next, we will examine Professor William Mayer, who reportedly had been the guiding figure in Kasik's movement.]

Mayer's history began listing on the screen. They had no mercy for Mayer, either. They delved into his private life, twisted it around, and showed it to the entire world. This level of violation of privacy was well beyond what was allowed by Federation laws. Yet, despite this horrific disregard for personal life, the viewers of the network and its reporters were casually laughing it off.

"Wow."

“That’s going too far.”

“I never knew that humans were capable of being this cruel to another human being.”

We all froze in place, stunned by the broadcast-- excluding Admiral Luise, who slept through the news. I thought I’d already seen everything in my century’s worth of life experience, but I was clearly wrong.

And, at that moment--

--*BAM!*

The hotel’s windows turned brown once more, and another part of the city lit up in flames.

Part 2

“...They actually fired on the city?!”

I couldn’t believe my eyes. They actually attacked! The ships in orbit fired on the planet! There are millions of hostages here, and they still fired at us!

The cannon fire flew straight from space and landed somewhere in the city. Its power was likely reduced beforehand, but it was still a shot from a destroyer. They had plasma cannons that could charge up to fifty gigawatts of power. At full power, a single shot was far more powerful than Little Boy, a nuclear bomb that was dropped upon Hiroshima sometime in history. They had not charged the cannon to that degree, but I still felt a powerful quake sweep over the city.

“B-but there are innocent civilians here!”

Another light flashed in the sky as if to answer my shout, and another plasma shot landed elsewhere in the city. A giant explosion raged in the distance, and its shockwave triggered the automatic shielding to lower in front of the hotel’s windows. They kept the windows from shattering apart.

I immediately switched on the television to look through the camera on the outer hotel walls. Assault dropships were slowly descending from space. They had just begun entering the atmosphere, supported by covering fire from the destroyers.

“They’ve gone insane! Do they even care about the non-combatants here?!”

“They might be thinking that they’re being careful enough.” Ensign Meihowa answered my question. She seemed just as distressed by these insane acts of terror, however.

Our sense of duty as soldiers was crumbling down. There are countless innocent civilians here, and they’re doing an assault drop into the heart of the city! And it’s a full frontal assault! Have they thought about how many casualties they’d end up with?!

The assault ships continued dropping down. The ships with platoons ejected various equipment and began retaliating against the ground defense on their own. Plasma cannons wildly fired, hitting the defending Alter-Armours and parts of the city.

Those cannons were nothing like the main guns on a destroyer, but they still weren’t something that minor-class Alter-Armours could withstand-- and, just like that, any missed shots had a huge risk of civilian casualties.

One of the Alter-Armours nearby dodged an attack, and the plasma landed on a distant part of the hotel. The plasma burned through the wall and left a huge hole, filled with a cloud of superheated concrete, metal, and asphalt. Any people on the other side of that wall likely suffered the same fate.

“This is just crazy!”

The anti-air guns in the distance swiveled in the rain of assault ships and their drop pods, blowing their parts that crashed into the hotel and other buildings nearby to create a thick cloud of dust. This operation... had absolutely no consideration of civilian casualties. They were only interested in finishing quickly.

Only the insane could think of such a plan. I couldn’t sit there and watch it happen! I dressed up and prepared myself to head outside.

“Lezirth! What are you doing?!”

“Everyone, get to an underground shelter! It’s too dangerous to stay in the hotel!”

“But...”

“Ensign Meihowa! Pull the fire alarm! We need to bring all the civilians here to a shelter!”

Ensign Meihowa nodded. “Okay-- I mean, roger!”

Determination flared from her blue eyes. The vacation was over. The playful half-Elcro girl was no more, and she was once again an Ensign of the Federation. Though without any weapons, she armed herself with an armour of will and a sword of determination.

“Alright. We’ll need something to start taking control, right?” I kicked a window out. The glass shattered along with the protective shielding in front of it. It might as well have been a sheet of paper against a dropship’s plasma cannon, anyway.

“Let’s go!”

I jumped out of the building. Leaping from at least twenty-five floors above the ground floor, I turned around to slide down against the building’s exterior and reached the first floor lobby.

There, a Tri-Walker was firing upon the panicking civilians who were escaping the hotel en masse. Its three legs, standing over a meter and twenty centimeters, steadied its Colion rifle like a camera tripod and fired on the move. As a mindless drone, it was programmed to prevent anyone from leaving the hotel, and so it was mercilessly shooting at the civilians who fled the building before it collapsed under fire from the invasion.

One of the Tri-Walkers found and confronted me. [Please return to the building. If you attempt to exit the building, we will attempt aggressive persuasion.]

Damn it! I swung my fist in response.

--*Crack!*

The Tri-Walker was crushed into a metal scrap without contacting with my fist. I used my telekinetic powers, of course.

[Hostile detected!]

“That’s right!” I grabbed the scrapped ex-Tri-Walker and threw it at the other walker. They collided and were both reduced to an ugly mess.

At the other side, guarding the entrance to the casino, another Tri-Walker began firing its Colion rifle. I quickly turned around and projected a field of vector reversal.

The barrier could change the vectors of oncoming objects to deflect projectiles, but it required a lot of focus to be able to handle more than one projectile. Trying to use it against an enemy that was out of my sight was a little... risky.

--*Pew!*

The Colion round smashed against the barrier and changed its trajectory back at the Tri-Walker. Its legs snapped off and the main body crumbled with it. As if it were undergoing rigor mortis, it fired its rifle wildly into the air before dying down completely.

I turned my attention to the scared civilians nearby and the victims of the Tri-Walkers.

“...Damn.”

The local navy initiated a fight despite the hostages. And the rebels killed off even more hostages in order to secure their control. They were having their own war above this planet's skies, in place of the Federation and the Alliance.

...Why did the local government's military attack the civilians?

A little thought produced an answer. The Federation certainly wanted this situation to be over as quickly as possible. The local military was capable of doing just that, and the Federation would owe them a favour. Looking at the sequence of events that led to the moment, there was definitely a secret deal between the Federation and this planet's government. They were probably promised some financial and political support.

Unlike the Federation-owned planets, the autonomous planets had their own economy and social structure, so they had to be mindful of the Federation government. Unsurprisingly, the winners in politics tended to be the ones with some backing from the Federation. And those people were the type to be unmindful of some civilian casualties if they could continue receiving their backing.

What a bunch of dirty pigs. There are innocent people dying here, all in the name of securing a political standing.

In retrospect, I should have realized this a lot sooner. How could I have been so slow to know that they were going to start firing on the city? Maybe I was subconsciously wishing that the Federation had not reached such a level of corruption. But now, they had fully wronged me.

Then, what about the Alliance? Could I trust the Alliance?

Were they serious about leading an alliance of diverse races? Could it be more than mere propaganda? My instincts were screaming at me otherwise. ‘Don't trust them, they are all liars’.

After their major victory in the Oden system, they were able to strike a peace treaty with the Federation in their favour. As long as they had the Hyper-Kishin Duskbringer and Tetragrammaton, they were too dangerous to provoke. The Federation Fleet was not in any condition to consider resistance, so they had to accept any unfavourable terms. This was how the universe saw its peace from the war.

Yet, they clearly did not want peace. What they really wanted was the total destruction of the Federation and the full inheritance of their power.

They demanded the autonomous planets to betray the Federation and join their ranks. If they were bringing peace to the world in exchange for the death of their major political enemy, then they could not be trusted to be bringing peace for the sake of humanity and love.

I could feel their hatred towards the Federation.

“Is it really a war between villains? Ugh, I’m tired of it already.”

I scrounged around the fresh scraps of metal for a Colion rifle. The gun was originally designed for infantry, so a little hacking could get the rifle functional for personal use. I tore apart the rifle’s control panel and ripped out the Hyperspace-net communicator, leaving the gun at a factory state where pulling the trigger fired the gun directly. Anyone could use the gun now.

With the gun in my arms, I hopped up a pillar and jumped on the hotel’s walls. As I ran up the building, the rebel Alter-Armours were exploding into fragments around me from the invading ships. Far away in the distance, the government building and the parliament were turned into rubble from the cannons of the ships above. It did not look like there were many surviving rebels.

Was it the end of this skirmish?

Of course, this fight had basically gone off like a hostage situation where neither party actually cares about the hostage. If you just shoot everything that gets in the way, it was surely going to end quickly. It was horrible murder, yes, but I had to admit that it was an efficient solution.

But the fight couldn’t have been over just like that. The rebels had to have expected this.

As if to answer my questions.... something dropped down from space and pierced through one of the landing ships. The ship split cleanly into two halves, and a bluish, metallic board spun through it.

The flash happened first, and then came the deafening blast of sound. I couldn’t help but panic whenever I saw an explosion-- worrying about how much damage it would do this time, maybe.

--*Kaboom!*

“Kuh!”

I jumped through a broken window and returned to my room. Meihowa and Aroha hid behind a pillar to avoid the storm of shrapnel that blew inside.

“Kyaaa!”

“Meihowa! Aroha! Take this!”

I threw the rifle at them. Sergeant Aroha grumbled loudly as she checked the remaining ammunition. “Agh, I don’t even know what’s going on anymore. It’s all downhill from here, right? What’s gonna happen now?”

Then, another ship exploded in the sky. After that, a cruiser slowly descended from the sky - closer look revealed that an Alter-Armour was carrying the entire cruiser. The Alter-Armour was projecting a dark force field that engulfed the cruiser!

That size was definitely a Kishin!

It wasn’t like any Kishin I had seen before, however. It was covered in metal shells, yet retaining its figure and standing at... thirty-eight meters tall? Its reflective, red shell was reinforced by black plating. Its body was slender and thin overall, making it look swift by design.

Around its hips, it wore a skirt made of metallic boards, accentuating its womanly proportions. But that skirt wasn’t just decoration-- it was the object that previously split one of the ships in half. It seemed to be a remote-controlled BIT weapon that could individually send and control each piece, and since it was a Kishin weapon, I had to watch out for special powers that may have been hiding within them.

--Discordant Thundergod, Saika has arrived!

As the will of the Kishin made its presence known, it threw the cruiser down. An eight hundred meter long cruiser was flung at the city without any of it being scraped off by the atmosphere!

Or so I thought-- the cruiser was maintaining its height within the atmosphere. Not only that, the cruiser and the Kishin was working together. It fired its cannons and destroyed the surrounding landing ships, and more frigate halves fell from the sky.

The cruiser was taken over!

“Of course. I was wondering what got them so confident-- this whole rebellion was done with the help of the Alliance.” I sighed.

“A Kishin? Again?!”

“The Alliance probably didn’t have any Hyperspace-warping ships to spare.”

Right, what to do now? The situation had been turned upside down. At first, I thought I would punish the local military for their complete disregard for human life and save the innocents. Then, some other guys showed up and killed off everyone who I wanted to punish. And they weren’t any nicer, either. Really, what was I supposed to do? I may have risen to the rank of Vice Admiral at one point, but when situations change this rapidly, I couldn’t get used to it myself.

Then, Admiral Luise rose from her seat, yawning loudly.

“Ahhh.... Lezirth?”

“Yes?”

She rubbed her sleepy eyes. “I’ll try to take over the Alliance’s network.”

“What?!”

Ensign Meihowa, Sergeant Aroha, and I stared at her, jaws dropped, while Admiral Luise simply smiled back at us.

What was she thinking?!

* * *

The Kishin of the Alliance, Discordant Thundergod Saika had made its appearance. With it came its supporting troops that quickly captured the cruiser. The local military continued their resistance, only to be destroyed by the overtaken cruiser.

From these events, we came to a conclusion: the Alliance had their own autonomous military AI, and its system was comparable to, or able to outright steal the Federation’s systems. If that wasn’t the case, even if they were able to kill every single personnel within the cruiser, they couldn’t possibly have taken over the ship that easily.

Without the authorization from the military AI, it was impossible to make any militaristic action through the system. The AI controlled every aspect of the Federation’s military, down

to the individual infantry-issued rifle. Perhaps in old films you might have seen a boarding crew taking over a ship through force, but such a strategy was no longer possible.

And yet the Alliance managed to do it.

I should have known, however-- the whole reason the Replicant rebellion remained strong was because they managed to overcome the problem with the military AI. And, of course, the rebellion at this moment couldn't have succeeded without the Alliance's support with its own military AI.

And now, Admiral Luise wanted to control it as her own.

If anyone else were to suggest it, I would have dismissed it as someone rambling in their sleep. However, she already held the record of gaining the highest level access into the Federation's systems. Since she could hack into the Federation systems, she should have no problem with the Alliance's.

"So, what should I do?"

"Hm. First, we'll need to acquire some communication equipment that is networked with the Alliance's system. Oh, nothing simple like the Colion rifle. I doubt there is any information to be had from a soldier-level access. And it would be helpful for my hacking attempt if we had something owned by the rebellion's leader, yes? Or maybe we can get an Alter-Armour?"

Sergeant Aroha waved her hand in disapproval. "Wait, but we only have three Colion rifles! Are we going on a suicide mission?"

But Ensign Meihowa, who had been on board Dawnbringer Minion with me, shook her head. "It's possible if it's Lezirth."

"Wha-? It's possible?"

Then, Admiral Luise arose from her seat. She looked back at the massage chair with a slight look of longing, and then turned away. "Lezirth, could you bring me to one of the enemy Alter-Armours? I feel more comfortable stealing one myself."

"No need. Let's call an Alter-Armour to us." I shrugged and aimed a Colion rifle out of a nearby window. The rifle fired a blinding blast of plasma as I held down the trigger.

When Sergeant Aroha noticed what I had done, she began panicking. "What are you doing?! They're going to come for us now!"

“That’s what I’m doing!”

About the same time that I replied, a clanking sound echoed from a ventilation shaft. Tsk. I wanted to call an Alter-Armour over, but it seemed that I ended up with a Tri-Walker after us instead.

I waited for the right moment, and leapt as the Tri-Walker broke the vent in the ceiling and dropped down from above. I gave it an uppercut.

--*Crack*

The Tri-Walker split cleanly into two metallic halves. I salvaged another Colion rifle from the broken wreck. I took the Colion nanomachine rounds since I had no time to waste on hacking it.

Then I saw an Alter-Armour fly to my direction from outside.

“Alright, then!” Admiral Luise clasped her hands behind her head. And as she combed her hair up with her palms...

Her hazel-blond, tomboyish hair suddenly extended to great lengths. Various transparent, almost colourless lines peered out from her hair. One of these lines, brightly shining as it reflected the sunlight, shot towards the approaching Alter-Armour.

[Wh-- What?! Why are these sensors going wild?!] The pilot within the Alter-Armour screamed as his vehicle slammed straight into the hotel’s outer walls.

Admiral Luise and I had enough psycho-telepathic powers to shut down any low-ranking Alter-Armours through direct contact alone. Our brains had sensory capabilities that far transcended a normal human-- in comparison, the Alter-Armour was too weak to withstand the sensory overload caused by a connection to our nerves. Normally, the sensory connection was only possible from the pilot’s seat, but Admiral Luise forcibly broke within to knock its systems out.

“What in the world?!”

“Her hair?!”

Aroha and Meihowa were quite surprised by Admiral Luise’s new looks, and even more at the fact that she took out an Alter-Armour with no other means than direct contact. But we still had the pilot within to take care of.

I picked up an emergency fire extinguisher from the room and threw it towards the Alter-Armour's cockpit. With phase-shifting applied, it flew straight through its outer armour. When it broke halfway through the armour, I reversed its phase. Then, the pilot screamed from within the cockpit as the fire extinguisher popped inside. I approached the Alter-Armour and pulled the pilot out, who was struggling to escape.

"First off-- this rebel Alter-Armour should be... connected to the Alliance's systems, yes? It should have a networked computer, somewhere. Check the pilot's rank for me."

Ensign Meihowa looked at the rebel's rank insignia. "Oh my, a master sergeant!" She rummaged through his pockets and produced a pistol and a radio, which she handed over to Sergeant Aroha. Sergeant Aroha, meanwhile, used cable ties to restrain his arms behind his back.

The master sergeant tried to spout what probably was a flurry of angry words, but ended up throwing up foam from the fire extinguisher, and...

SMACK!

Sergeant Aroha punched him square on his head, knocking him out.

...Why not at least let him talk? And how did a lady knock out a well-built military man out in one punch? It wasn't even on his chin or temple, but right on his cheeks!

"Come on. What else would he say in this situation other than insults? What, did you want to hear him bark?"

Bark, huh. Well, I did want to hear him talk. One of my favourite things is hearing useless complaints of P.O.W's, and... er, I mean, only in war movies, because I've only been in major wars with aliens and the Letix, not other humans.

I shook my head and watched Admiral Luise hack through the Alliance's systems.

"He should have all the basic user rights as a master sergeant, so where should I begin? I need to see what kind of defenses the Alliance has..." Admiral Luise brushed her hair aside and connected directly to the computers.

Soon, she had a master sergeant's access into the Alliance's Hyperspace telecommunications network. She fiddled with the computers eagerly to try and gain a higher-level access. But soon, the Alter-Armour's alarms began screaming.

[Self-destruct sequence initiated. Would you like to continue? If you wish to detonate within the atmosphere, please press the enter key.]

“Gah!”

“Wh-what is that?!”

Everyone began panicking and backed off.

Admiral Luise quietly sighed, and nimbly moved her fingers around. “A systems administrator from the Alliance must have found out what I was doing. I thought I had already shut down the automated system.”

And when Admiral Luise pressed the enter key, the Alter-Armour flashed brightly in a violent, nuclear reaction...

....In my mind, that is, and the Alter-Armour merely restarted its systems instead.

“It’s under the Alliance’s radar, now. It looks like I lost the master sergeant access, though. Hmm? Is this counter-hacking?” Admiral Luise asked herself as she turned on the Alter-Armour’s pilot computer.

On the screen was a zoomed-in face of a young girl. After recognizing that the video feed was on, she backed away and smirked. [I was wondering who dared to hack into my system, and what is this? It’s just a little girl!]

To my surprise, she was the girl from the television a few moments ago: the self-proclaimed Luise Maynard, a chief of the Alliance.

“Oh, my, aren’t you glad that you’re so much older? I can see from those wrinkles on your forehead.” Admiral Luise retorted, calling the girl old. ...Please, you should know better than to say that, Admiral.

[Kya! Wrinkles?! For your information, I look so incredibly young for my age that lolicons would be drooling and praising my looks! I look younger than you, you know!]

“Wow, is that so? You must be happy that you’re loved so much by lonely perverts! I’m so jealous of you! Golf clap!” Admiral Luise’s words were very clearly laced with malice. She was smiling and clapping for the girl in the screen, but it was nothing short of a blatant taunt.

‘She’s angry?’

She was angry that she wasn’t successful in her hacking attempt. Normally, a hacking attempt consisted of stealing and breaking apart an enemy computer or equipment so they

could be repurposed for allied use. No one tries to take over an entire military network. So, even if she wasn't able to take over the Alliance's network, she was at least able to commandeer the Alter-Armour.

But the fake Luise must have felt that the hacking attempt was a personal challenge to her, and so she took it upon herself to counter-hack despite being in the position of a chief. Still, the real Luise was able to skillfully deny her efforts.

[Ugh. You're such an annoying little brat, you know that? Who are you, anyway? Federation hacker? Maybe a freelancer?]

Admiral Luise hummed to herself and replied half-heartedly. "Who knows?"

[Fine, that doesn't matter now. Hey, do you want to come work for us instead?] The fake Luise bravely offered the real Luise a scouting offer.

Admiral Luise smiled. "Depends on the conditions."

[Oh? Alright, you can be my personal advisor. If you want, I can get you assistants. I'll even give you an officer's rank! We'll go into details in a meeting later, but I'll guarantee that whatever it is, it'll be a lot nicer than the crap you get from the Federation.]

"Is that so? Could I also bring over my friends and family? It's going to be awkward with me alone."

[Are they all on Critik-4? If so, sure.]

"My family is a kind of a big family... Will that be okay?"

[Sure, that won't be a problem. So, if you want to accept my offer, surrender yourself to the next Alter-Armour or soldiers in the area. I'll send one of the rebel soldiers to your location.]

One of the soldiers, she said-- but from a distance, two Alter-Armours were approaching. One of them stood behind the hotel to keep watch while the other flew over to receive our surrender. As if that wasn't enough, a battalion of Tri-Walkers barged through the corridors nearby. It seemed that we weren't being trusted just yet.

"Oh, my mistake!" Admiral Luise exclaimed in a very unconvincing way as she began moving the Alter-Armour. She moved its arms to quickly fire its rifle at the forehead of an approaching Alter-Armour, and another strand from Admiral Luise's hair shot towards the other Alter-Armour to knock it out.

Meanwhile, I fried the creeping Tri-Walkers with my psychic bolts.

[Hey! You brat, what have you done?!] The fake Luise exploded in fury as her offer got denied. Her anger was fully justified this time, I felt.

Admiral Luise scoffed. “It was just a mistake! Could you send another for us, please?” She jumped out of the open cockpit of the Alter-Armour and jumped to my side. At the same time, it projected a psychokinetic barrier that was too powerful to be maintained by an Alter-Armour of that class.

However, a metallic plate from the skies roared through the air, penetrating the barrier and splitting the Alter-Armour in half.

“Ah!”

I grabbed Admiral Luise mid-air and pulled her back. The angry chief of the Alliance, the fake Luise, had informed Kishin Saika of our location.

“Ugh... What were you thinking, provoking a Kishin?”

“But Lezirth, we can’t go to the Alliance! The Federation might not be any better, but it’s at least...”

“... Yes, you’re right.”

I realized that Admiral Luise had figured out the contradictions in the Alliance’s promises. Well, I was never particularly smart, but Admiral Luise was a certified genius-- she should have already realized it long ago.

“... At least, I already have the Federation’s systems under my control.”

“... .. Oh.”

Okay, never mind.

For her, it seemed, the importance lay in whether or not she controlled them rather than the actual intentions of either faction. That’s... scary.

“Run!” I yelled at Meihowa and Aroha as I ran away with Admiral Luise in my arms.

The wall crumbled apart as Kishin Saika reached into the hotel with its arms, and swept across the hotel’s hallways. Ensign Meihowa, leading us forward, shot her Colion rifle at the elevator door in front of us, and she jumped into the elevator shaft to hold onto the elevator’s traveling cable.

“Lezirth! In here, quickly!”

“Of course!”

I lowered my body to slide on the ground under the broken elevator doors. I flew right through, and grabbed the cable firmly with my legs.

-Cr-rack!

Kishin Saika felt around the hotel floors with its arms, looking for us, but retracted its arms after many futile attempts. Fortunately, it was quick to give up on us.

I stood against the walls of the elevator shaft using my powers, still holding onto Admiral Luise. Meihowa and Sergeant Aroha stuck their Colion rifles between the cables, sliding down the shaft with slowed descent. The way they rappelled down without any proper tools but some rifles was... quite professional, even from the perspective of a vice admiral. Maybe my personal relations with the two ladies affected my judgment, but they were definitely skilled nonetheless.

--Bam!

Suddenly, the walls of the elevator shaft exploded apart as an arm of a giant Alter-Armour broke through. It tightly gripped onto Sergeant Aroha and pulled her out of the building.

“Kyaa!” Sergeant Aroha screamed. Her cries soon faded as she was fully pulled away from the hotel’s interiors.

‘Did they throw her out of the building?!’

I had to rescue her! I prepared myself to burst out of the building.

But then, a soft, warm hand pulled my arm away. It was Admiral Luise. She quietly shook her head.

I quickly came back to my senses. Maybe I could have gone out if I were by myself, but I had Admiral Luise in my arms. Ensign Meihowa had her rifle to rappel down the shaft, but Admiral Luise had no such means. Facing the Kishin with her in my arms wasn’t an option, either.

But what about Aroha?

[*Chi! Tarsus! Apimel, Inuit!*] I heard a woman mutter.

Curious, I tried to look outside through the hole. Admiral Luise stopped me, connecting her strands to me, changing my sight to the eyes of one of the security cameras on the outer walls

of the hotel. The mutterings of the woman, the pilot of Kishin Saika, was also translated from the Asa tongue to what I could understand.

[Damn! By the name of Tarsus! Did I only get one of them?]

In her hand was Sergeant Aroha. She was laying still, unconscious.

[Maybe I should crush her right now? ... But wait, she's the same race as I am. What is happening? Have I made a mistake?!] Kishin Saika scratched its head-- without any hair, it was only mimicking the pilot's habits.

I leapt towards Ensign Meihowa, grabbing her too as I dropped down the shaft. At that moment, Saika rummaged through the broken elevator shaft with its arms to inspect further inside.

'Shouldn't an Alter-Armour have advanced sensors like heat detection?'

Having a Kishin rely on 'eyes' for vision was extremely primitive. As I had suspected, they had no clue how to operate Alter-Armours. It resembled the way primitive humans would act when faced with computers-- they would operate it only by memorizing input and its matching output, rather than having a complete understanding of its inner workings.

[I suppose this will do. This woman will have value after interrogation. We are done with the suppression of the counter-attack, so we must retreat and regroup with the rebels!] A young woman spoke from within Saika.

And throughout, we hid in the shadows, powerless and defeated, while being forced to watch Sergeant Aroha get captured and taken away by Saika.

Part 3

"I-I'm sorry. I've made a terrible mistake." Admiral Luise apologized for angering the enemy leader.

"That's alright. You wanted to dig intel out of her by making her angry, right?" Ensign Meihowa did not blame Admiral Luise. She understood that the Admiral taunted the enemy so that they might slip useful information.

"So, now what do we do, Lezirth? Sergeant Aroha is taken by the enemy, so..."

“We have to rescue her, of course.” I shrugged, and began some quick research on Saika from my PDA. It took only a single search with its name in a search engine to find information on the Kishin. Shouldn’t something like this be kept as a closely guarded military secret...?

I had no idea how, but it seemed like there was a lot of information about Saika available on public networks. There were many videos of it in action, and a few blogs for analysis on its machine specs. Some of the videos were fan-made compilations of Saika’s achievements.

“Saika has always been piloted by Asa’s princesses.” Ensign Meihowa spoke as she performed quick maintenance on her Colion rifle.

“Princesses?”

“The women of the Harakal-class in their caste system, the ones who have not yet produced an offspring are called princesses. I don’t know the specifics myself, but what is known is that the pilots of Saika are the most powerful people of the Asa. The culture of the Asa is the survival of the fittest-- only the greatest of the Asa are allowed to pilot the Kishin.”

“Is that so? Would that mean the Asa have a very militaristic culture?”

As I asked that question, the city’s civil defense siren blared throughout the area. Only the sirens around the streets surrounding the casino were active.

[Attention! If you are currently situated within the hotel, you must relocate down to the end of Twentieth Street.]

With the announcement, multiple military cars entered the street. Admiral Luise looked through the security cameras around the hotel and found that at least a single platoon was transported there, and multiple Tri-Walkers could be seen.

“What is this? Trying to control the civilians themselves?”

“I found the Kishin’s location, Lezirth. Their Kishin is to the south of this street, down Twentieth, and stationed inside Hyondai Stadium.”

“Erk. A sports stadium?”

The rebels must have been trying to gather the civilians at the stadium. The stadium’s purpose may be for playing sports, but that was going to be changed if the rebels were sending people there; in places like a stadium or a concert hall, a small military force could effectively control a large group of people by blocking the key exits. Forty Tri-Walkers armed

with Colion rifles could shoot down about fifty thousand people before they could escape the building. Perhaps the rebels were going as far as thinking about executing the civilians.

"I doubt they will try to kill the civilians. I believe their objective is to transport every single civilian on Critik-4 off the planet." Admiral Luise assured me confidently.

I became curious. "Hmm? How can you be sure?"

"I asked her a few moments ago, remember, if they could guarantee my family's safety even if I had a huge family. But she was very quick to agree to my demand, without asking how many people I had with me, as if the number of people was of no concern as long as they were on Critik-4."

"Ah! Of course."

"The Elcro army used a technique called the Gate to transport their troops from one place to another, yes? Maybe the Asa have another special way to do the same thing. Or maybe Kishin Saika was equipped with a special technology?"

I nodded. Admiral Luise's plan from before seemed to be finding out from the enemy leader if any of those guesses were correct.

Ensign Meihowa had not yet understood that. "Hold on, why would they move the hostages? To where?"

"To the Alliance, right?"

"Then they're aiming to kidnap civilians? What in the world?! That's a serious war crime!" Ensign Meihowa exclaimed.

They were committing a war crime, admittedly-- however, they also did not have the same history as Earth's humanity. Before the eighth century, humans went as far as having a culture of burying prisoners of war alive, but humanity's culture had evolved to find that to be horrifying.

"Calm down, Meihowa. You can think of them as having an old human culture. The Alliance needs manpower the most right now. Their civil production should be severely weak with only the Replicant rebels and two factions that failed the space race. You can see that from the way their weapons are mostly from Federation rebels."

The Alliance was limited to weaponry from the Replicant rebels-- the same weapons and armours issued to the Federation. While they were certainly capable of producing their own

equipment, they did not have the economy to support a stable production. They had to fight with severely limited ammunition and equipment, and so they were very willing to take dangerous shortcuts like using Duskbringer to wipe out the Federation fleet.

They had to do whatever it took to survive.

And to support their unstable production, they had to invest more manpower. The quickest way to do that was to kidnap educated people from the Federation who were exposed to high levels of studies in science and culture. By putting educated people into work, they could facilitate quicker growth in their infrastructures.

“What about the rebels here?”

“They’ll likely be sent off to the Alliance, too. I don’t know how, but...”

“Then Sergeant Aroha is in danger, too. Could she be taken by the Asa?”

“Probably.”

I sighed. It was foolish to fight Kishin Saika with my bare hands. I had to find an Alter-Armour of my own... “... What about Dawnbringer Minor...?”

“It’s currently being held at Ipis Sector.” Admiral Luise responded to my quiet grumble.

Dawnbringer Minor. It was originally a Minion-class Alter-Armour that was assigned to Ensign Meihowa, created from sampled cells from Dawnbringer. However, during the battle in the Azoran system, it was able to evolve to Minor-class after consuming a part of Dawnbringer’s Alter-Core that was integrated within Kishin Diablo.

Admiral Luise’s studies found that the Alter-Armour had visibly grown to a Minor-class size, but the potential power resting within was much higher than any other Minor-class, and it could even use Dawnbringer’s abilities if it was for a brief moment.

If I could use that, then I had a chance against Kishin Saika. But I had no time. As long as Sergeant Aroha was taken hostage by the enemy, if she doesn’t get tortured and killed, she was going to be taken out of reach by the Alliance.

“Lezirth.” Admiral Luise called to me, as if she read my thought.

“Colorado.”

“Hmm?”

“If we can get Colorado back... we’ll challenge Saika then.”

“...” Admiral Luise lowered her head in thought.

Ensign Meihowa was shocked to hear what I said. “What?! Did you just... are you actually trying to fight Kishin Saika with your bare body? No way, Lezirth! Even with your powers, that’s suicide!”

“But we don’t have time to waste if we want to rescue Sergeant Aroha. I have to earn time for us until Dawnbringer Minor can get to Critik. And no, I’m not trying to fight Saika with nothing to help it.”

Take back Colorado, and use it with an Alter-Armour stolen from the enemy. That was my plan.

“But... hold on.” Ensign Meihowa fiddled around with her PDA. Soon, noises of glass shattering came from somewhere, and soon a big object climbed over the broken walls of the suite room. It was her bike that she had bought before, called over here remotely.

“”Let’s go together!”

“A-alright!”

We jumped out of the hotel. Outside, there were many armed soldiers and Tri-Walkers guarding the surrounding area... Hmm? Why are there so many soldiers here?

“P-put your hands up!” One of the soldiers shouted, his arms quivering. The soldiers’ faces here looked very awkward to me-- they weren’t familiar to me, yet I felt some sort of deja vu.

Wait a minute, these are the protesters from back then! William Mayer’s groupies!

“Y-you!” Mayer made his appearance, wearing a very unfitting black beret. He looked distraught that I showed up here. “Hold it, don’t shoot him!”

“But he’s holding a weapon!”

The soldiers were afraid of the Colion rifle that Ensign Meihowa had been carrying around.

Mayer jumped down from his military transport. “These guys and I know each other!”

“If chief comrade knows them, we’ll hold.”

Wow, what an embarrassing choice of words! Who calls each other “comrades” nowadays? It makes me cringe just hearing them!

They weren't rebels, nor were they the resistance, so they seemed to be inducted into the rebel forces after the government's counter-attack reduced their numbers. I was wondering why the rebels were so devoted to Mayer's words; he seemed to be Kasik's mentor after all.

'It took a guy like him to start this rebellion?!'

Well, the coup would have happened regardless of Mayer's presence. The local population was clearly against the Federation's rule, and the Federation was clearly corrupt in their dealings with them. At least, Kasik might not have become the leader of the rebellion and taken as a complete fool by the Federation's civilian news team.

The strangest part of this moment was that I felt like I was talking to an actor in a perfect costume-- someone in a convincing outfit that was unmistakably a soldier's, yet could not have been more apparent that he was only acting in the end. William Mayer was that man.

"I have turned my back against the Federation for the future of Critik and have joined forces with the Alliance. You... we're far from strangers, so I will not stop you if you quietly went back into the hotel." Mayer spoke coldly, but obviously with good intentions. He apparently kept in mind that I stood up for him last night, when he was working for us as a tour guide.

I suppose this is what they called the 'tsundere' archetype, but at the moment, exploring that side of the world wasn't going to be any more helpful than going back to exploring the world of Shanghai mitten crabs.

"Eh, about that." I raised my hands above my head. The bike broke through the hotel walls and dropped on my hands. It was a very light bike, weighing less than twenty kilograms, but it had dropped from sufficient height to create cracks on the surrounding ground below my feet.

"Whoa!"

Surprised, the protesters scrambled for their guns. These people were definitely unsuited to act like they were soldiers. Tsk. I almost worried for the state of the rebellion's lack of proper military personnel myself.

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

"What? Wait, why not?!"

"What are you people going to do after transporting the civilians over to the stadium? You're not going to kill them, are you?"

I definitely knew they weren't going to, but I asked to seem like I was suspicious of them. Any stuck-up people like Mayer were guaranteed to reply in fury. He had great education but always felt underrepresented in society. He felt that he deserved more from this world, going as far as mentoring for a rebel leader to gain respect. It was obvious what he would say next.

"Don't make such stupid assumptions! That's not it at all! I am a part of this rebellion for a greater cause!"

"..."

"This is all for the future of Critik...!"

Just as planned.

Though, there was truth in his words. This man had gone through the trouble of acquiring a doctorate, yet he had to resort to a job as a tour guide that was not suited for him. For most citizens of Critik, their biggest source of income was the spending and tips from rich Federation tourists. Just to survive, they had to sell their smiles and souls, while their hatred for the Federation grew.

I wondered how strongly he must have felt that the Federation owed him. It wasn't difficult to understand why he would have done the things he did-- but that was then.

I thought about Sergeant Aroha, and what kind of trouble she might be in...

Following that thought, a large digital sign on a distant building began displaying Sergeant Aroha's face. She had bruises on her face and bled from a cut, likely injured when she was forcefully ripped out from the building before. Her injuries seemed pretty light if that was the cause, but...

[Smile, traitor!]

A young lady's voice came from the speakers around the sign.

Sergeant Aroha was restrained to a chair with ropes, and multiple ladies surrounded her, armed with a sword each.

I was surprised at how beautiful the ladies were. They had amazingly pearly-white skins as if they were physically glowing, and their bodies were slender and enchanting like a white lotus. These stunning ladies surrounded Sergeant Aroha.

The camera turned around to then focus on a different lady, with silver-blond hair and dark-brown skin, laughing at Sergeant Aroha. Her healthy tone, sizable chest yet thin waist, and her Alter-Armour pilot suit that tightly wrapped around her body to reveal every detail and curve were enough to possess any man. Despite all that, I found myself wanting to see more of the other girls.

W-wait, that's not important right now!

[An Asa, willingly working for the Federation military?! I haven't seen a more despicable thing!]

The silver-haired lady chopped the top of a bottle on a nearby table with the side of her hand. The top section of the bottle cleanly fell away, causing its content to bubble out and drip down. Bubble champagne? She picked up the bottle and began chugging it down voraciously.

...Huh? She's going for a wild-wolf-style attitude with an appearance like hers? It was cool how feisty she was, but she was failing at instilling fear-- I was confused, instead. Maybe because she had none of the elegance of her appearance. A quiet, gentle-looking girl appeared next to her and cleaned after her.

[Now, pay attention, everyone! Ahem. I am a princess of the Sentosa system and a pilot of Kishin Saika, Rear Admiral Riznah Eresiki-gal of the Alliance!] She shouted, pointing the broken bottle at Sergeant Aroha. Sergeant Aroha moved back in surprise, and the lady almost contacted the broken edge of the bottle onto Aroha's face. If she moved the bottle further, it was sure to cut a new wound on Aroha's face. But the Asa princess called Riznah played around with the bottle rather than cutting her, spinning it around dangerously. [This girl is an Asa just like us, yet she claims to be a soldier of the Federation. That is worthy of a punishment, yes?]

[Yes.] [That is correct, Harakal.] The elegant girls to the side simultaneously agreed.

Suddenly, a line of text appeared on the screen to accompany her speech.

---Harakal: Royal ranks of the Asa, the top of their caste system.

“....”

What was that for?! I thought this was a horrible public execution, but now it just looks like they meant it to be a reality show!

“Ugh.”



“Man...”

Even the protesters beside me groaned. I couldn't say anything, either.

But the lady on the screen, Princess Riznah smiled in satisfaction, spinning the bottle on her hand.

Hey, lady, you can't seriously be happy with that kind of acting! I wished I could have told her that, but she spun the bottle only an inch away from Sergeant Aroha's face. If she slipped even by a tiny margin, Sergeant Aroha may have ended up with her face full of glass.

[Agh, what do you think you're doing?] Sergeant Aroha began speaking. Unafraid of the situation, she looked at the camera and grinned. [If you're going to show my cute face on television, at least dress me up first! And clean up these scars, while you're at it.]

Her confident, smiling face gained a fresh, bloody scar at that moment.

The Asa princess grimaced, pointing the bottle at Sergeant Aroha's face. [Are you trying to look brave?]

[Not at all, I'll gladly beg for my life if you'll let me live.]

[But?]

[But it doesn't look like you'll let me live regardless, you see? So, what do you want? My deepest, sincerest apologies? Or... a wild, hot show for the audience?] Sergeant Aroha took a look at the camera, and purposefully entwined her legs together. She was still in her hot pants, and her new pose accentuated her athletic, well-crafted hips.

--Gulp!

The bunch of hastily formed soldiers simultaneously gulped nervously. Men.

And the caption did not fail to show up again.

--Ooh~!

...What am I supposed to think of this?

[You seem to want to get something out of this, if you're broadcasting all of it. Why don't you tell me what you want, Harakal?]

[Hm.... yes, that'll be nice. Umea!]

--Umea. The warrior caste of the Asa. Third highest rank.

Of course, the caption showed again. ...Also, Umea? I had little idea how the caste system worked, but it sounded like Sergeant Aroha was a part of a highly respectable rank.

[I remember you, Umea. Your father is a human, yes? And I have heard that the 'Black Sisters' have trained you so that you may join their ranks, is that not correct?]

[...] Sergeant Aroha flinched.

The caption again did not fail to explain this new development.

--Black Sisters: The highest level Asa Council of Elders. Controls the politics of all Asa nations.

[You're not trying to say that you're my little sister, are you?]

[What are you talking about? I'm only interested in the Umea that the Black Sisters once wanted to recruit. Now, become my handmaiden! If you promise to repent for your past with the Federation and become a part of the Alliance, then I will forgive your sins!]

--The Generous Harakal!

Terrible show! That act was so fake that I'd rather believe an Easter musical at a Sunday school was the real deal! And that caption ruined it even further!

But now it was clear-- they wanted to show that they would even take Federation soldiers into the Alliance if they intended to jump ship. Gross! This is the most blatant, up-front propaganda I've ever seen! They could not have expected Sergeant Aroha to accept that!

And Sergeant Aroha was a Federation soldier, after all. If she had said 'Yeah, sure!', she would earn a free ticket to the Federation military prison if she were to be rescued and returned. There were too many witnesses around to avoid that fate.

But if she made a mockery out of the Asa princess instead, then her life would be put in danger. What could she do? She may very well accept the Alliance...

[Can we talk about this again when we know each other better? We're not at that level yet, I don't think.] said Sergeant Aroha, smiling. She was expected to beg for her life and look cowardly, but she looked like she was enjoying the situation, instead. That was her charisma.

In any case, that was a great response. She had earned extra time for us

* * *

The broadcast went quiet as the tense moment passed by.

“Eh...” Mayer turned back around, snapping out of confusion from the broadcast. He looked absolutely befuddled, as if he drowned in bottles of vodka not a second ago.

“Anyway, you--”

But I was already on the bike with Admiral Luise in my arms, with Ensign Meihowa sitting at the back seat with her Colion rifle trained on Mayer.

“Wait, what?!”

“Sorry, friend, I have to go save that lady in the television. Could you kindly not get in my way? Or would you like to join me as a bargaining hostage?”

“Argh! You’re insane! You’re going to die if you go there! And it looks like she was that Asa girl after all!” Mayer warned me. The soldiers around him immediately pointed their guns at us.

“Thanks to that broadcast, everything is clear now. There really is a way to move an entire city’s population from Critik to someplace else, huh?”

My rhetorical question surprised Mayer. “H-how did you know that?!”

“Well, because they went through the trouble of doing that broadcast. If you guys are bringing people to the stadium while making a show like that one, you’re trying to convince them what a nice time they’ll have when they’re with the Alliance, right?”

“...”

“Are you sure you people are from this age? All these things are the oldest tricks in the book! You might have a better time convincing people back on eighteenth century Earth. Hell, the act was so hilariously bad, I have to give it to Sergeant Aroha for not laughing through the whole thing. No, wait, you guys will probably take it as a compliment if I said it was funny. Let’s just stop at ‘you suck’.”

Mayer ground his teeth after listening to my stream of insults. But soon, even he had to agree. “I-I can’t refute that. The Asa and the Elcro are culturally equivalent to sixteenth century Earth, so their sense of dramatics is... outdated. But she’s also the Rear Admiral of the Alliance...”

Ah, so he went unheard because of his inferior rank. The rebellion took on the full risk at the start of this coup, but it seemed that the Alliance took full control of the situation over time. So that’s why these poor people had to play along...

“You should think about quitting while it’s still early. Anyway, see you later!”

“Wait!”

I revved up the bike and spun around, and then I was off. The soldiers panicked and reached for the triggers on their guns, but I had already used telekinesis to accelerate the bike forward. We blasted forward at an amazing speed, while plasma shells from behind harmlessly bounced off of my projected black barrier.

Normal force barriers were able to effectively deflect an average plasma shell. However, an untrained practitioner occasionally burned or blinded himself from plasma shells creating powerful light and heat from friction with the barrier.

A black barrier, on the other hand, operated purely through the force of gravity, by creating a localized ergosphere. It wasn’t something that could be created on the spot-- I had to remember the universal location of micro-black holes created by the Sole Power of Heaven and Earth, and their ergosphere was projected at a location at my will. The black barrier ignored the limits of distance of a conventional teleportation.

“Whoa! What the hell is that?!”

“A power user?!”

“No way! How can anyone use psionic powers at a casino city?!”

I continued onwards, leaving the shocked soldiers behind me.

“Ugh! What do those Asa think they’re doing?!” Ensign Meihowa groaned from behind, hanging onto me as the bike gained speed.

“How should I know?! Our first course of action is retrieving Colorado and Rabbitte the Rabbit! And we’ll rescue Sergeant Aroha after that! I can’t believe she has to deal with those insane maniacs alone!”

I felt like I was committing a terrible crime. Sergeant Aroha was a very strong woman, so that alone bought some time for us. I imagined that anyone else would have gone completely insane after being thrown into a reality show produced by writers from the medieval age. My own body couldn’t take it after taking a short glimpse of their act-- what would it feel like, being the center of attention within it?

--Haah... Haah...

I heard someone breathing roughly. I looked down in surprise, and there I saw Admiral Luise heaving deep breaths as she latched tightly onto me. Was it too hard to breathe at the speed we were going?

“Are you alright?”

“I’m not-.... I-I’m alright. Don’t worry about me.”

“...How can I not worry?”

I became overly conscious of Admiral Luise’s soft breaths brushing against my chest. Whoa, no way, I shouldn’t have become aware of it! I tried to separate away from her a little. But suddenly, Admiral Luise shook violently and hugged me tightly.

O-okay, so she was holding on because the bike was jerking around too much. No other reason, right?

By the time I came back to focus, we had already made our return to Chinatown. Even the Chinatown entrance was guarded by soldiers and Tri-Walkers.

“Should we make a forceful breakthrough?” I asked.

Ensign Meihowa shook her head. “No, that’s going to bring more of them here. I’ll lure them away.” She set her Colion to remote control mode and approached a worn car on the road. She struck the windshield with the back of her rifle and fit it between the broken bits. She opened the door to the driver’s seat, set the car on automatic driving mode, and held down the trigger to the rifle remotely.

--*Pewpewpewpewpew--!*

The Colion rifle sprayed its plasma shells around Chinatown. The car drove itself on the road encircling the area. The stationed soldiers, Alter-Armours, and Tri-Walkers all turned their attention to it and dispersed. We used the opening to sneak to the antique shop, but its door was closed for the time being.

“One and a half billion credits... Is it really going to be okay for us to take them? Shouldn’t we at least get the owner’s consent?” Admiral Luise spoke nervously. She was worried that, instead of working up the proper quest line to acquiring these items, we were stealing it in the end.

I shook my head. “We can’t be choosy at a dangerous time like this. Necessity of defense! The laws of the world protect us with that reasoning.”

Ensign Meihowa had already begun picking the lock to the display case while I spoke. It was a traditional metal lock, rather than a modern, electronic lock, so Ensign Meihowa had to physically work it herself.

“Wait, when did you learn how to pick locks, Ensign Meihowa?”

“You know, I like to watch old movies from Earth. I practiced with it, but the real thing isn’t as easy as I thought.”

“Hmm...”

I could have gone inside myself by phase shifting, but it was meaningless for me to go inside alone. W-wait, what if I just brought everything out through the display window?

But then--

“Customers?”

A voice called out from behind us. Behind us was an old man, slouched down and staring at us.

“Erk!”

“Kyaa!”

“Ah!”

The too-suspicious trio ceased their burglary and jumped in surprise. How did the old man approach us without us noticing?

“Hm. Looks to me that you came here for Colorado and Rabbitte. Since you have an Elcro with you, I presume you’re the hagglers that William Mayer worked for. But-- I am not selling these to you. Please leave me be.”

The old man asked us to leave and turned around to leave, when it was obvious that we were trying to steal from him.

“But wait, there’s a price tag...”

The old man answered Ensign Meihowa. “They are my personal values for Colorado and Rabbitte the Rabbit. They are meant to show how much they’re worth to me! I do not mean to sell them off!”

“...But why is Colorado cheaper than Rabbitte?”

“Hmm?!”

“N-nothing.” I immediately shut up. Admiral Luise shrugged at me and smiled. She probably meant to look smug, but with her face, she just looked like a little girl doing a preschool exercise routine. In a good way, of course, not to make fun of her.

“Hold on, wait.” I came back to my senses and stood in the old man’s way. “I really, really need Colorado. A friend of mine is being held by a dangerous enemy...”

“Humph! You think you can use Colorado?”

“Of course.”

“Do you take that sword for a fruit knife, boy? That sword is...”

Ensign Meihowa sighed as the old man began a lengthy grumble. “Lezirth, you don’t have to deal with an old loony like him.”

“Hmm? ‘Lezirth’?”

The old man fell silent and inspected me from head to toe. Erk, what’s going on?! I felt like I was being touched by his eyes, like hardened prisoners looking at a fresh inmate at a max security prison...

“Hmm. Well-built body, and, hum, hmm...”

“E-excuse me?”

“Maybe? No, no, that cannot be.”

The old man muttered to himself, and passed by me to the door. He produced a key from his pockets and opened the case to Rabbitte the Rabbit and Colorado.

“Try using it.”

“...”

I took Colorado. I felt a wave of nostalgia wash upon me. The heavy weight on my hand was exactly that of the last feeling I had, when it had fell from my grip a hundred and twenty years ago. My companion blade had been waiting for me for more than a century.

‘Even if it had become so arrogant and took upon such a ridiculous price for itself.’

The blade had gone from being a free, military-issued blade to being an antique worth five hundred million credits. What a promotion! Meanwhile, its owner had gone from being the Vice Admiral to a shopkeeper on a resort planet.

I sighed, and raised the sword above my head.

And then,

“Hey, there they are!”

“I knew they’d be here!”

A crowd of soldiers ran towards us. Even an Alter-Armour came after us, smashing into walls left and right as it staggered forth.

“Surrender now!”

[We’ll let you live if you do so!] The Alter-Armour aimed its rifle at us.

I smiled.

--Sacred Sword!

At that moment, Colorado became a crimson, blinding beam of light within my hands. It had been quantized, so naked eyes saw nothing but light. I gently swung the blade down, and cut apart the Alter-Armour’s rifle.

[Kwargh!] The Alter-Armour’s pilot screamed.

The soldiers reacted by aiming their rifles at me, but I swung my blade once more to destroy their rifles. Those who continued to resist found that their rifles were no longer operational.

Admiral Luise hugged the robotic rabbit like it was a child’s toy. Light emanated from beneath the rabbit’s face and projected comical expressions. It opened its enamel-red eyes.

Rabbitte the Rabbit-- it was the first reboot after more than a century of sleep.

From the robotic rabbit, multiple transparent lines flew forth and penetrated the soldiers’ weapons and the Alter-Armour. That was all it took to shut them down completely. Even reverting to factory mode could not get the guns to fire-- it was more than a digital shutdown.

[Hello, mistress! Great to see you again! Our last meeting was a hundred and twenty years, twenty-eight days, and fourteen hours ago!] Rabbitte spoke in a robotic tone. Its AI was highly advanced, but most of the AI was designed for Admiral Luise’s convenience, and it

did not have emotions or a personality. Yet, Admiral Luise calmly pet its head-- as if she was proud of it for staying operational after more than a century of our absence.

The old man was utterly shocked to see these events unfold.

“Whoah! Oooooooooaahh!”

Take a breather, old man! The man suddenly ran towards us and held my hand. He looked pleased to see us, like looking at an old friend. Unfortunately, he looked like a decaying zombie when he lurched towards us, as if he was from an old horror movie.

“That was the real Sacred Sword! Th-then, you are...!”

“Ah...”

I regretted what I had done. I had revealed my true identity to the old man. Admiral Luise had also revealed herself by having Rabitte call her its master.

But the old man’s next words defeated my expectations.

“I was waiting for you, Vice Admiral Lezirth! Admiral Luise! Finally, the Prophecy is set in motion!”

“...What?”

What’s going on?!

Part 4

The old shopkeeper handed over Colorado and Rabitte to us for free.

Rabitte’s irises changed their shape into two question marks. Admiral Luise asked, “Why would you do that? These are worth one and a half billion-- no, you said you wouldn’t sell it for any price!”

The old man shook his head. “I’ve never meant for these treasures to gather dust in my display case for eternity. Admiral Luise, Vice Admiral Lezirth, you are the people that these treasures were waiting for all along.”

The man reached for his necklace. The necklace opened up, revealing a small hologram chip within. The chip played a holographic picture of a middle-aged man, bearing a befuddled expression as he carried a young boy in his arms. The middle-aged man was in the uniform

of the Dawn Corps. The mark of a breaking dawn and a sword-- that was the symbol of the Dawn Corps.

“They are my father and my grandfather.”

“Hmm?” I returned my attention to him.

The old man gently opened his eyes with his fingers. His aged, focusless irises had golden, translucent, and sticker-like attachment. “I also am a Replicant.”

“But that doesn’t...”

“A cross between a human and a Replicant, to be specific, but I was still a Replicant by law. So, when I was young, I was made to put these in my eyes.” The old man’s cane began violently shaking in his hands. “Not only that, the Dawn Corps’ existence had been written out of existence.”

“What do you mean?”

“Humanity could not accept the great achievements of the Dawn Corps. No, they wanted to convince the world that humanity itself had done all those achievements, rather than relying on the inferior Replicants, who should have been the lowly tools for humans. That was their reasoning.”

“But how could they have done that? There should have been many people who knew the truth! How could they write them off, just like that?”

I became curious. After the countless battles between the Federation and the Letix, only the Dawn Corps had remained in stable numbers. It began with only Kishin Dawnbringer as the sole member, but as the other groups were nearly wiped out after each battle, the survivors gathered into the Dawn Corps.

Sometime during the latter half of the war, the Dawn Corps had grown large enough to nearly equate to the definition of the Federation military. What could they have done to change history to forget the existence of such a powerful group? Even worse, this hadn’t occurred thousands of years ago, but it was merely a century ago.

“I do not know the details myself, but I have heard that a powerful mind-control was involved. The Alliance’s Lezirth Dawnbringer and Luise Maynard were speaking the truth in that regard, though clearly not about their identities.”

A power user to that degree... But the notion of altering the minds of the entirety of humanity was at an absurd scale, and even if such power existed, it should have created a disastrous level of Hyperspace corruption around the universe.

But it wasn't the time to be asking questions. If I didn't rescue Sergeant Aroha soon...

"B-but, before you go..." The old man rummaged around his belongings for a camera. "M-may I take a picture of you, sir?"

"..."

I didn't know what to do. The old man looked on with very eager eyes.

I remembered seeing those eyes before. When the Letix army revealed itself to humanity and put us at the brink of destruction, the military wanted me to lead an army parade to give hope to people. I didn't want to do it at the time, but I had done it reluctantly due to Admiral Luise's insistence. And so I led the parade, while people watched on with eager, hopeful faces, wishing their sons and daughters to return from the war in one piece.

I remembered those days.

"S-sure." I stiffly stood in front of the camera.

The old man gleefully took a picture. "Thank you very much! Ah, I am so very glad that I have not perished earlier!"

"I, uh, that's nice of you to say." I scratched my cheeks in embarrassment.

"So, how did you end up with Colorado and Rabbitte?" Admiral Luise appeared from beside me and asked.

"My grandfather was a Lieutenant Colonel of the transport squadron of the Dawn Corps. So... ha ha-- ugh- *cough*, *cough*--...."

When I first saw the old man, I thought he was a stoic, quiet man who would never talk unless he needed to. But at that moment, he looked like a little boy meeting his hero, shaking my hands vigorously. He talked so rapidly that he was coughing for the rest of the words instead.

"A-are you alright?" Admiral Luise patted the man's back.

The old man nodded. "I am fine. I must be too old for this."

"..."

“Should you not be leaving soon?” The old man asked, cautiously inspecting us.

I nodded back.

Admiral Luise wanted to give her earnings from the casino to him. “To be honest, I had more money than I suggested. Please, take these.”

“No, there is no need. These treasures were here for safekeeping, but they are ultimately your belongings. Are they not?”

“Even that coin-operated case should cost a lot to maintain for a hundred and twenty years. Please, I insist that you take at least five hundred million credits.”

But the old man refused vehemently. “If you continue to insist, I will bash my head against that stone statue until I perish.”

We really couldn’t argue against that, and so we quietly left the shop.

“May you bring the light of dawn into this universe.” The old man softly spoke as he saw us out.

Ensign Meihowa sighed. “So they did exist after all. The Church of Dawn, that is.”

“The Church of Dawn?” I quickly looked it up on the network. The first thing that showed up was an insult, calling them a crazy cult. “Wh-what is this?”

“Oh, it’s just a crazy cult that worships Lezirth as their god.”

“..... Huh?”

“A... a god?!” Admiral Luise was just as surprised.

A god... like the beings that people pray to?!

“It’s one of the few religions that the Federation tries to suppress, since all the Replicant rebels believe in it. Hmm? What’s going on, Lezirth?”

“...Nothing, I’m just very embarrassed.”

I had always been called a war hero a century ago. I realized that I’d never had too much of a thought about that. I was trained to fight as a soldier since I was young and fought against my enemies as a soldier should, and then I had found myself leading the Dawn Corps into a great war that decided the fate of humanity.

For a man like me, I felt that I was undeserving of the old man's attitude. I became burdened by a suspicion that I might have had an important purpose in my life.

Burden. Yes, that's what I had always felt.

I wasn't a better man than any other. I was only a single person. People expected too much from a guy like me. It wasn't just the old man-- people from a century ago had burdened me with too many expectations. And I was constantly afraid that I would never be able to meet their expectations.

The old man had trusted me enough to trade his life away. Rather than take the half a billion credits from us, he insisted that he'd rather break his skull on a stone statue. What kind of beliefs did he have, to drive his life to this point?

I would never know.

After taking our leave, we prepared an Alter-Armour to pilot. Admiral Luise reprogrammed the rebel Alter-Armour so that I could use it. In the mean time, I inspected the tall gate at the entrance of Chinatown.

"That's made of metal, huh?"

I thought, if I could take the gate apart and pierce Colorado through it, I could make use of it with the Alter-Armour. By rigging the metallic parts as the hilt of Colorado, I could convert them to be a part of the Sacred Sword's blade.

I imagined that it would make the sword look somewhat like a slightly long knife, or maybe a small sword in the hands of a Minion-class Alter-Armour. And maybe a fruit knife in a Kishin's hands.

"But this doesn't share Dawnbringer's core. It's using a Nameless core. Are you going to be okay with that?" asked Ensign Meihowa.

All of my abilities were specialized for Dawnbringer. Back then, I was capable of fighting against a Kishin with a Minion-class Alter-Armour only because Ensign Meihowa piloted one with a Dawnbringer core.

But what about a Nameless one?

...I was honestly worried.

When I challenged Diablo, the Black Tyrant, its pilot was so inexperienced and fresh that he looked like he couldn't do any more than baby steps. Even then, despite the best of my

efforts, I wasn't able to do a good deal of damage to Diablo. On the flip side, all it took for Diablo to do significant damage to me was slamming the ground with a single finger.

Compared to Diablo's pilot at the time, Prince Tenseron, I had been told that Asa Princess Riznah was much more competent. Could I, with nothing but Colorado to my advantage, stand my ground against her?

But I knew that I had no choice. As long as Sergeant Aroha remained captive, I had to rescue her before she could be sent away from this planet. Knowing that I had no other choice, I had to be thankful that I at least didn't have to charge in with my own human strength.

I jumped on the Alter-Armour and pulled apart the metal gate to hack it onto Colorado.

"Alright, Lezirth! We'll try to do what we can by hacking and calling reinforcements. Even if it'll be slightly late."

"Is the Federation sending a rescue force here?"

"They'll have to send one. No, we'll force them to send one no matter what. But if we do that..." Admiral Luise made a bitter, hollow smile. "That means we'll have to call back our squad from their hard-earned vacations."

The Bomb Cadet Squad that went through hell and back in the Azoran system. The group of expendables, composed of Replicants and half-aliens. That was our squad.

The problem was that Dawnbringer Minor belonged to this squad. To make the Federation send it to the Critik System, we had to make sure that the rescue squad was them, specifically. Although they already had to give up their vacation days to answer the call to arms, how could we dare bring them back to a life-threatening battle after they had to endure so many already?

It wasn't the right thing to do. Maybe I should have stolen another Alter-Armour that stood a better chance.

But then,

"Okay, they're inbound!"

Admiral Luise had already manipulated our squad to reinforce this area without a second thought.

.....

Admiral Luise was... in a way, maybe, perhaps, a very cruel being. If not for her, the Bomb Cadet Squad would have likely avoided the dangerous front lines, but... ..Oh well, it was too late.

I needed Dawnbringer Minor, after all.

“Lezirth! That armour is technically registered as Federation-owned, but the Alliance systems should recognize it as their property. You should be able to stay undetected until you can get near Kishin Saika, and launch a surprise attack whenever possible. Or maybe, if the pilot hasn’t boarded yet because she’s too busy with that stupid reality show, you could take control by killing the pilot immediately.

“Y-yes, of course.”

“But be careful! That systems administrator for the Alliance, that little girl we saw-- she can’t be taken lightly. And the pilot, too.” Admiral Luise moved away from the Alter-Armour.

Ensign Meihowa and Admiral Luise planned to hijack more enemy Alter-Armours to distract the enemy.

Before I began, I went to a supermarket within Chinatown. The Alter-Armour’s arms rummaged around the storage room to gather a pile of energy gels. I brought them into the cockpit and stacked the contents in the corners around me.

Alter-Armours are living beings. Though they produced strength that exceeded the energy that they gained from whatever they consumed by using other sources of power, they still needed a source of nutrients, like energy gels.

After procuring enough energy gels to fill up the cockpit, I also found myself a folding shovel from a nearby tools shop.

My preparation was done.

It was time to fight another battle against all odds.

* * *

Heavy squall swept my path. The south of the casino street was a great turquoise sea, and its condensation met with the cold wind from the mountains to form into a sudden but frequent rainstorm.

The raindrops fell on Hyondai Stadium and rolled down its transparent ceiling. The open stadium had an antigravity dome as its ceiling to protect from weather, but let the sunlight through.

In front of the stadium, in the parking lot that was several times larger than the building itself, the rebels were busy screening the civilians. All around the lot, Tri-Walkers patrolled watchfully, and many military trucks and buses came and went to drop even more civilians. The rebel soldiers divided the civilians by their worth, based on their jobs. It only took a single step through the identifier to gain complete information on each person, so the process did not take very long.

Thanks to the numerous members of the Manus Solidum who joined the rebellion, the screening went by even quicker.

“Damn it.”

I knew the locals were very unhappy with the Federation, and I couldn’t fault them for taking action to better their lives, and yet I couldn’t help but sigh. The Federation was clearly not doing a great job, but the Alliance couldn’t have been any better for them. The Asa had a caste system, and the Elcro had a monarchistic government. These people were leaving the Federation because of its rule based on the economic power held by dominating governments, and were joining the Alliance where the ruling power was based on social classes.

I slowly moved my Alter-Armour towards the stadium. Fortunately, the armour must have been recognized as an Alliance asset as explained before-- other Alter-Armours and soldiers didn’t seem to be too mindful of my approach. I could even hear through the Alliance’s private channel.

[The first round of screening is eighty percent complete!]

[As expected, there aren’t too many experienced technicians. Should we start transporting people in district twenty-two?”]

From the talk that went on, there was no more doubt that the Alliance was kidnapping everyone in order to find more skilled workers to aid their war efforts. It was obvious why they were classifying people based on their jobs.

[What the hell is up with that Amazoness princess, anyway?]

[She really likes that Asa girl, huh? Making her a handmaiden...]

I could also hear their casual conversations.

Curious, I looked within the stadium. Inside, beneath Saika, Sergeant Aroha and Princess Riznah Eresiki-gal were having a talk. I wanted to eavesdrop on them, so I turned on the light sensors. The sensors picked up the vibrations of objects near sound sources by echoing laser on them, and converted the vibrations to a audible sound waves.

[....Ushu? Toride anakil devka?]

[Zashi, anzai toride...]

Whoops. I had forgotten to turn the translators on.

I opened a translator application on my PDA, but all it did was tell me to pay for a premium downloadable content if I wanted to translate Asa languages. Damn. If it were military property, it would have been free, but I had to use a civilian machine for my vacation.

After quickly paying up, the translator program flashed and began translating their conversation properly. Wait a minute, where was the download? It seemed like the application had the Asa translator installed all along, but locked behind a paywall.

[We Asa consider you as one of us, even if you were born between a human and an Asa. Our bloodlines are considered from the mother's side, not the father's, and you are a worthy Umea. It's also quite nice that you have the knowledge of the latest Federation military technology during your career as their soldier. Did you know that only a handful of Asa soldiers are capable of piloting an Alter-Armour or a cruiser? Knowing that, will you not help us? If you will, then I will turn the broadcast back on so you may publicly tell me of your new allegiance. If you do so, then I shall consider you as my second in command.]

[I'd really like to do that, but I'm telling you, that's going to be difficult since one of my friends is coming over to rescue me.]

[Here? Rescue you? Do you really believe that?]

[I survived a problem like this once already, so why not?] Sergeant Aroha boasted, not mindful of her situation yet. When a hostage is that confident, it would be strange for the kidnapper to not feel overwhelmed.

[Really, I do wonder where your confidence is coming from...] As expected, Princess Riznah had become confused. [Hmph. No matter. I'll be bringing you over before anyone else.]

[Are you... thinking of using Black Magic on humans? You'll create a Hyperspace corruption.]

[Preventing that is the true power of the Thundergod Saika. Kishin Saika with Black Magic should be more than enough to safely teleport everyone in the stadium safely. Repeating that several times should be enough to teleport every citizen before the Federation army gets here. Think carefully-- there may be many who oppose the Federation rule here, but they have no means to take act because the Alliance is too far away physically. But what if we can prove that their problem is not actually a real problem? The Federation will soon meet its end.]

[No. This is just kidnapping. You're not taking people who are volunteering to go! I don't know about your culture, but don't you know what a grave crime it is to involve innocent civilians, much less kidnapping them?]

[No matter. We need people. We need much more.]

Then, a man in a suit walked forth from behind them. It was a man from the television some time ago, Kasik, the leader of the rebellion. Kasik was using the first standard language of the Federation, English, and the Asa seemed to be using their own translators to understand him.

[Wait! That's not what we agreed on before! You told me you'll be sending my rebellion first! And use the civilians as hostages for leverage!]

So his plan was to extract the rebels first. That was why the rebels were very confident about fighting against the local government and taking on the Federation, despite the Critik system being directly next to the Federation systems.

[Our imperative is to extract the civilians before all else. Lieutenant Colonel Kasik, you should be remaining here and protecting our flanks against the Federation so that we may complete extracting civilians. Also, mind your tongue. I'm a chief.]

Kasik looked annoyed. [Chief, is it? Just because you've been lucky enough to be born to the right mother?]

[Chief, because I am capable of piloting a Kishin and leading a troop. Why? Do you think you could do better than me?]

[Hmph. a Kishin, eh.] Kasik peeked to the side at the Kishin that leaned over the stadium.

[There is no need to worry. It won't be too long before you get your turn. When you are brought to the Alliance, you'll be recognized as a hero. Perhaps many Asa families will be after your heroic genes. You could very well say goodbye to the days of being unpopular with women.]

[You...! How dare you! That report was completely falsified!]

Kasik yelled as hard as he could, but the other Asa quietly giggled and refused to take him seriously. What a clown!

[Alright! Laugh as much as you want! It'll be the last time you'll ever laugh. Hmph! Let's see if you'll still be pompous when I ask the Black Sisters to hand you over to me!]

Princess Riznah stopped laughing. The other Asa's faces became stiff.

It was about time for me to interrupt their little party. I began thinking of my next move. If I could kill Princess Prizna while she was out of the Kishin, I could easily end this ordeal. It didn't seem like there was anyone else who were capable of piloting the Kishin in her place, either.

But my mind strongly refused against killing a cute, young lady. Even if she wasn't an innocent civilian, but a chief of the enemy faction.

I still had to kill her. I carefully detached the metal gate from Chinatown. I had already destroyed the Alter-Armour's rifle from the previous scuffle and no other ranged weapons were on the armour, so I had little options. But if I could throw the metal gate, it could easily kill any human being it hit.

"Now..."

I prepared the Alter-Armour to throw the metal gate.

But then,

--*Whiiiiirrrr!*

Suddenly, a red light flashed brightly within the cockpit. At the same time, the cockpit ejected itself and exploded forward!

"Agh!"

Then, through the communication view, the fake Luise revealed herself.

[Kyahahahahaha! You thought I'd fall for that? I've been waiting for this moment!]

Damn! It was a trap?! After being shamed by Admiral Luise, the fake Luise must have been carefully watching over the equipment in Critik to note any suspicious activity.

[It was a good thing that I've been watchful of any Alter-Armours that went offline.]

Admiral Luise had stunned the Alter-Armour to hijack it. The fake Luise saw it coming and kept track of Alter-Armours that went off at any time.

She wasn't small-time, huh? I readied myself for the impending fall. Before the cockpit hit the artificial grass, a parachute deployed itself and slowed my descent. The cockpit slid gently down the grass. I burst out of the cockpit with a kick after hitting the ground.

But a beautiful, blonde girl was waiting outside to greet me with a Colion rifle.

"Hold it right there, human." Threats came from her bright pink lips. She spoke with an unfamiliar, weird accent, but it sounded nice regardless.

Looking at her again, she was very beautiful. Pale skin, gentle demeanor, and-- her chest wasn't worthy of note, but her smooth legs were pleasing to see.

...Wait, what am I doing?!

I broke out of my trance and stood up. I first raised both of my arms to let her drop her guard. I wasn't registered as a psionic, so there was little reason to be wary of me if I didn't have a weapon.

[Riznah! Make sure he doesn't try anything funny! He should have a girl working with him somewhere around here! Also, he's probably a power user, or at least as dangerous as one!]

And then my effort to drop my enemies' guard went to waste. The self-proclaimed Luise warned the Alliance soldiers of what I am.

The Asa princess asked. [Eiredith! Did you say there was one more?]

[Wah! Why did you just call my name in front of the enemy?!]

[He's already captured, so what could be the problem?]

She did not seem to think too highly of either Sergeant Aroha or I. Also, Eiredith? Was that the real name of the fake Luise? If that was the case, then the Alliance had always known that the fake Luise was indeed not the real deal. Or maybe only the higher authorities like the Princess knew that fact.

"Kiske!"

“Yes, Harakal.” The blonde girl who was called Kiske dropped a pair of handcuffs in front of my feet. “Put them on yourself, human!”

“Kiske, was it?” I looked at her, picking up the handcuffs. They were a specially designed pair of handcuffs, made to suppress the use of psionic powers on the wearer. Of course, my powers were still of considerable strength even with disruptions like these, but to try and rescue Sergeant Aroha with these...

“Quickly!” The girl known as Kiske hurried me, using the end of her rifle as encouragement. I sighed, putting on the cuffs on my wrists.

“Wh-who is this? A Federation soldier? A Federation agent?”

Kasik was particularly disturbed by my appearance. He should have already known that Sergeant Aroha was a Federation soldier, so he was assuming that I had also belonged to the Federation in some way.

But I was just a soldier on a vacation. ...We’ve been doing much more than anyone on vacation ever would, so his guess wasn’t strange. But even if I were actually a Federation agent, he was more worried than I would have expected of him. He wasn’t really fit to lead a rebellion, after all.

The Asa princess scoffed at his attitude. “What a pathetic display! A man like you will be seen as a hero by the Alliance? Hmph! In any case, I will be starting Saika.”

To my surprise, Saika moved by itself to bring its hand down in front of the princess. Once she stood on top of its hands, Saika brought her near its cockpit beside its chest.

‘She’s pretty good!’

Moving the armour without directly piloting it meant that they had a long history between them. That also meant that Riznah herself had a great deal of field experience. Even if she belonged to a culture with very little development in organized military, she must have been quite the formidable pilot if she had enough experience to move the Kishin without piloting it. That is, even an early human who used nothing but a crude rock axe would become a great marksman after spending five thousand hours with a rifle.

[Bring in the people!]

Saika's head shined a bright light. Kishin Saika had been activated. Metallic plates around its waist hovered up in the air and fell down and embedded in various places circling the stadium.

---*Vwooooooom!*

A powerful vibration shook the entire stadium.

"Damn! Are they starting it already? Let's fall back!" Kasik ordered his troops and headed to the dugout area of the stadium. Kiske and other Asa followed with Sergeant Aroha and I. The civilians soon entered the stadium from various entrances.

"Why did you come here, Lezirth?"

"To rescue my Sergeant, of course."

Sergeant Aroha smiled at my words. She'd been smiling that same playful smile all the time, but for some strange reason, her smile looked even more beautiful than usual. I had a feeling that I might have seen her first honest smile.

She shook her head and bore a more serious expression. "But what were you thinking, getting captured yourself?"

The girl named Kiske poked at my side with the tip of her rifle. "Stop chatting!"

I've had it with this! She asked for it!

I turned around and glared back at her, and... my face lit up in heat. Whoa, I can't even look at her without being embarrassed! I can't look!

"What are you doing, Lezirth?"

"Uh, I'm, um..."

I'd always thought Sergeant Aroha was one of the most beautiful ladies in existence, but I had changed my mind after seeing that girl. If she could have heard my thoughts I'd have been in all kinds of trouble, but she couldn't possibly have such powers, right?

"Lezirth, you're not thinking of doing something as silly as sparing people just because they're cute, or because they're ladies, right?" Sergeant Aroha stared at me with sharp eyes.

Occasionally, there have been idiots among the army who refused to kill women and worsened the situation.

The space marines who fought against the Letix, the Dawn Corps, were frequently involved in missions to cleanse areas corrupted by the Letix. When privates hesitated killing women, who usually looked normal on the outside despite the corruption, they usually suffered the consequences immediately when the Letix within them burst out and proceeded to consume the entire planet.

Since those problems occurred quite often, I had once replaced all the practice-use targets with pictures of women and children. The invalid targets that were once hostages were changed to men who looked like hardened criminals, while valid targets were children and beautiful ladies. This change had once gathered the ill attention of the media.

‘Were the rumours about the state of training procedures of the Dawn Corps true? Are you actually using these targets?’

The reporters had asked me, showing me pictures of one of the targets made for the Dawn Corps, however they got a hold of one. I was unable to avoid the question as it was a live broadcast.

Looking at the soldiers who looked troubled by the question, I came up with an answer myself.

‘What? Are you trying to make fun of Wally for looking like a scary, tough guy?’

‘Huh?’

‘Wally here, acting as our hostage in this training gauntlet, is just a normal guy who enjoys weight training! He might have overflowing testosterone as you can see from his large, bushy beard, but he’s a nice guy who lives with his aged mother, along with two dogs and five cats in his household! He may have had a troubling history with his ex-wife thanks to a small difference in beliefs, but he’s still a hard-working man who still loves his family enough to pay alimony on time! After all that, he’s had a run-in with a terrorist organization and became a hostage-- and what, you want him to be shot with a Colion rifle? He’s a villain because he looks like one? It’s all because of people like you that this world is screaming that appearance is everything!’

‘B-but one of the targets is a lady--’

‘She’s a terrorist! Disguised as a journalist!’

‘And the children...?’

‘They’re also terrorists, disguised as elementary school news reporters! Don’t be fooled by their young faces! The setting is that they’re actually in their sixties!’

‘What? Wait, why are they all journalists--’

‘Because terrorists like disguising themselves as journalists! At this very moment, there may be a terrorist here...’

One of the journalists in the conference had attempted to run away in surprise. The peacekeepers of the Dawn Corps immediately moved in to arrest him, and he later revealed that he was a member of the terrorist organization known as the Cult of Humanism, who had been terrorizing the Replicant population through violence.

Arresting a terrorist in a live broadcast in a middle of a conference had put on quite the show for the crowd. That day felt like it wasn’t too long ago.

And yet, I found myself reluctant to fight against these Asa girls.

“I’m all for gender equality, even when it comes to violence, but... I just can’t do it!”

“...Ugh. Lezirth, listen.” Sergeant Aroha sighed. “That’s a man.”

Hmm? Huh? What was that?

I was caught off guard by Sergeant Aroha’s sudden joke. How could that possibly be true? I looked at the blonde girl behind me, who looked more ladylike than anything else I’d ever seen. And that’s a man?

“.....”

“That’s a man. The males of the Asa are usually much more beautiful than females by human standards. The girls are nice too, I suppose, but they don’t compare to guys at all.”

“.....”

I looked at the girl-- I mean, boy-- named Kiske again. He nodded. “I am male, yes. P-please don’t look at me like that.” His aquamarine gaze dropped down, his cheeks bright. Wait, why are they becoming red?! And why is wearing a skirt if that’s the case?!

“Also, Asa traditionally have skirts for men, and pants for women.”

“Is... that so?”

Looking around, other Asa boys(?!) talked amongst themselves, laughing as they looked at me. As they met their eyes with mine, they blushed and looked away. Some of them gently straightened their skirts and looked down as if to politely bow.

They're guys? Them?! They looked like girls in every way!

"Kiske, was it?" I looked at him.

He aimed his rifle at me. "Don't talk to me!"

"No, I just wanted to make sure."

"Make what sure?"

"Make sure that..."

I quickly smashed his rifle upward by the link between the handcuffs and went behind Kiske to grab his neck. How was he so light?! He must have been less than forty-five kilograms!

"Kyaa!"

Even his scream was incredibly girl-like! I felt like I had bullied a little girl. I lifted him up high, and kicked the chairs around the dugout to fling them to the surrounding Asa.

"Kyaa!"

The guys screamed like little girls, and the women....

"Yaargh!"

...cried in a very brutish manner.

I removed the handcuffs by phase shifting, and grabbed Kiske by the back of his neck. His neck was so thin that I thought it would snap in half if I grabbed it the wrong way. I mean, disregarding that I could probably cut a metal plate like paper... And the feeling of his neck gave me an urge to feel about some more. It was almost as if I could get addicted to the touch. What manner of creature was this?! I placed the handcuffs around Kiske's wrists.

I felt slight pain digging into my sides. Sergeant Aroha was poking at me, staring at me with an angry face. Ah, I'd forgotten to remove her restraints, too. I cut the wires that bound her arms with my psionic power. Sergeant Aroha immediately picked up a Colion rifle that had fallen on the ground.

"Oh no! How did he use an ability with the handcuffs on?!"

“Probably because he’s still pretty powerful even with a little dampener, yeah?” Sergeant Aroha shrugged. She pointed at Kiske. “We’ll have to use him as our hostage to escape here. That princess seemed to like him in particular. It’s not normal for Harakals to call an Onbira by his name.”

“Onbira?”

“The ones who don’t belong anywhere in the caste system. The males.” Sergeant Aroha sighed. “My dad was one too, of course.”

After hearing her, Kiske twisted his body around to try and escape us. But he was too light and weak to accomplish anything with his strength.

...I thought our plan was to use him as a hostage, but I felt like I’d become some sort of criminal who had kidnapped a lady for nefarious purposes.

“Hnh... *sob*...” Kiske began sobbing and suddenly made a wide motion with his mouth, but I quickly grabbed his chin to restrain his movement. He had just tried to kill himself by bleeding to death from his tongue!

“Lower your weapons, every one of you! If you try to fight us, this Kiske friend over here will die a painful death!” Sergeant Aroha made a threat in my place. She pointed her new Colion rifle at the other soldiers. She couldn’t fire the rifle, however, since the rifle was registered to be only used by those of the Alliance.

Or so I had thought. The rifle sounded a beep, and soon it displayed the Federation logo in place of the Alliance’s. Admiral Luise must have been helping us from somewhere!

With Kiske forcibly dragged along with us, Sergeant Aroha and I escaped the dugout and ran towards the stadium exit. The other Asa quietly watched us leave.

This boy was an Onbira, who couldn’t enjoy the benefits of being in any caste. I didn’t know enough to say for sure, but he seemed to belong in a low class in the Asa social structure. And yet the other Asa, not just the males but the women too, did not move as we made our escape. Did the princess favour him that much? ...Favour?

Many images popped up in my head as to how Riznah was favouring this boy--

---*Smack!*

Sergeant Aroha swiftly jabbed at my side with her elbow.

“Why’s your face going red again?!”

“N-no, wait, this doesn’t mean anything!”

I grumbled as I followed Sergeant Aroha outside.

Part 5

Peacocks wear fanciful plumage to get noticed by peahen as mates. Peahen evolved for survival, having no unnecessary extravagance to instead blend better with the environment. This seemed to describe the history of the Asa race.

“That’s why a Harakal is a very dangerous being. I know you’re very powerful yourself, Lezirth, but please don’t challenge a Harakal on your own, okay?” Sergeant Aroha warned, breaking into various lockers around the locker room. She was looking for a PDA, but there were none around.

When we were caught by the Asa, our PDAs were taken from us and we had no way to contact Admiral Luise. We were scavenging around this locker room in desperation.

“Do you know about the Asa well, Sergeant?” I asked while inspecting the lockers myself.

“Considering I grew up as an Asa around other Asa, sure. Anyway, are we gonna be fine with... that?” She jutted her chin towards Kiske. He was cowering in the corner of the room, shaking in his handcuffs.

To think I just found a scared, shaking boy cute... I thought I should poke my eyes out. ...But none of this is my own doing! Everything is because of his existence!

“Then why would the Asa consider humans as potential mates, too?”

The fact that different aliens could mate and form an offspring was insanely unlikely in the first place. How did a race with a culture like that ever consider mating with males from entirely different species?

“The upper-class Asa tend to want stronger genes inheriting the family. Of course, the measure of strength here is extremely ancient: you need to accomplish great things. And human men are likelier to fit that need than Asa males.”

“Accomplishments...”

“Before the war, accomplishments would have had to do with trivial things like hunts, but these became war achievements after the war with the Federation began. The Asa males who hurried to join the war and prove themselves were quickly killed off. That’s when the women

began looking towards humans, too, as the history of the Asa goes. Why? Are you interested, Lezirth? The life of being a stud horse destined to make babies for the rest of your life?"

...

...I'll get punched again if I said that doesn't sound too bad, right?

Sergeant Aroha looked grave as she talked about the Asa. She wasn't in the mood for joking around.

"Why do you look so angry about this? Ah, I mean, I already knew that you wouldn't like seeing other Asa again, but..."

"I'm not angry, but... no, it's nothing." Sergeant Aroha glared at Kiske and sighed.

After looking through the last locker, I produced nothing but a few bottles of ionized sports drinks. I opened up the drink, at least, since I was quite thirsty.

Then Sergeant Aroha resumed. "...I'd been lying to you."

"Hmm?"

"In truth, my dad never loved my mother all that much, but... an Asa man."

"----Pwargh!" My mouth shot out the drink in surprise. I coughed.

Sergeant Aroha had a bittersweet smile. "The Asa don't believe in romance between men and women. They only consider the genes involved, and form offsprings. The Onbira need an achievement in order to prove that they are worthy. Those that manage will be chosen by the Asa females, and... they can sell their bodies to many different females."

"..."

"How could there be any love in a culture like that? Although I was born between my mother and dad, I lived most of my life as an Asa being taught by the Black Sisters, and my dad occasionally came to see me. Him and his real partner in life, that is."

"A-Aroha..."

"All I wanted was love and attention from my mother and dad. But being chosen by the Black Sisters as an Umea was apparently something amazing-- my mother was very happy to hand me over to them. My dad at least visited me from time to time, but you have to understand, Lezirth, I was just a kid at the time. For a kid that I was, the man that brought me to life, the

single family member who bothered to show me family love, he was too important to me. I wanted all of his attention and love! But...”

She was calling her father “dad” but her mother remained as “mother.” Was I right to pity her for her past? Would it have been an insult to her? I didn’t know, but it was hard to not pity her.

“And in the end, instead of living his life as a father, he...” She shook her head violently. “...And that’s why I’m not fond of seeing another Onbira. Sorry, Lezirth, for my tantrum.”

I gently put my hand on her shoulder. Then Sergeant Aroha suddenly hugged me.

“Sergeant?”

“Sorry... can I hug you for a bit?”

“But you already did!”

“....Heh.”

Her body was quite curvy and I had no idea where my arms were supposed to move next. If I moved them around her waist, the... pressure would have been too great on me. I ended up awkwardly putting my arms around her shoulders.

I still had her past as a little kid in my mind. She would have wanted to flaunt her beauty and charm around that time, but she never could, and maybe she was looking for attention now. ...But I felt it was rude to try and analyze her past like an armchair psychiatrist, so I stopped the train of thought.

“...Thanks for coming to save me. I didn’t want to return to my life as an Asa.” Her body shook. She may have acted tough in front of the camera before, but she was surely scared after all. She had more reasons to be scared than anyone else I knew, considering her past.

“No need to thank me. You’re my Sergeant and my precious squadmate, so I couldn’t let you get taken over by the Alliance.”

“Tch! I’m just a squadmate?” Sergeant Aroha grumbled.

It then came to my attention that Kiske was still in the corner, throwing dirty looks at us from time to time. ...I had forgotten about him entirely.

“...Chosen by the Black Sisters? When even the Harakals are rarely chosen?”

Sergeant Aroha moved away from me after Kiske made his presence known by muttering to himself. “A-alrighty, shall we move out?”

“...Excuse me, I am quite thirsty.” said Kiske out of the blue.

I was about to hand my bottle of drink to Kiske. Sergeant Aroha interrupted me with a shocked look. “Wait, Lezirth? Isn’t that bottle what you’ve been drinking from, so far?”

“Hmm? So what?”

“Isn’t that an indirect kiss?”

“I don’t believe in indirect kisses because I’m a realist, and-- no, wait! But he’s a guy!”

“Didn’t you hear me before, Lezirth? I said the Asa don’t believe in romance between men and women, but between just men...!”

“.....”

Wait, seriously?! I looked at Kiske to confirm. He blushed and shook his head. “I am dedicated to Lady Riznah, and I definitely do not have such... I-I’m really thirsty. I don’t believe that you will ever take my handcuffs off, and so I asked despite my shame.”

“And so he says.”

I looked at back Sergeant Aroha, but she had snuck behind me, trying to loosen my belt.

“Whoah! Wh-what are you doing?!”

“Here, Lezirth, try showing off your abs! Let’s see if his body will be honest!”

“Wh-what’s wrong with you! Sergeant, I wouldn’t...”

“Eheheheh, you don’t have to be embarrassed! It’s nothing new over yesterday night.”

Yesterday night? The time when I blanked out for a while after drinking too much? What happened in that time period?!

Dodging away from Sergeant Aroha’s sexual harassment, I brought the bottle to Kiske. He closed his eyes and opened his mouth wide. His small red tongue revealed itself from between his bright pink lips.

Whoa...

I placed the end of the bottle against his lips and tipped the bottle up, sending the green liquid down his throat. His marble-pale face lit up in red as he drank-- probably embarrassed

from being made to drink like this as a prisoner, right? If so, why was I also feeling a little embarrassed too?

I pulled back the bottle so he could have a little time to breathe. A stream of the liquid fell from the top of the bottle and down my hand. Kiske stared at the dripping stream with an empty expression, and soon extended his tongue to lick the liquid off.

“Hrk!”

I pulled back my hand in surprise. I thought my heart would stop at the feel from the tip of his tongue. Kiske jolted back, too, realizing what he had done without thinking.

“Ah, um.... Th-the drink was really delicious, and...”

“I-is that so? Th-that’s right!”

The Asa had the technology and culture equivalent to those during the fifteenth century on Earth, so it must have been his first time having such a refined, flavoured drink. Yeah, that must have been it!

“Having fun over there?”

Sergeant Aroha approached and hugged me from behind. Her voluminous upper body pressed against my back. I felt a shock course across my spine-- what was she thinking?!

“This is mine! Don’t even think about it! Grrrr!”

...I belong to the Sergeant?! Wait, that sounds like it could be understood in very wrong ways!

Before I could respond, Kiske gave a snooty look before turning his head away with a ‘hmph’.

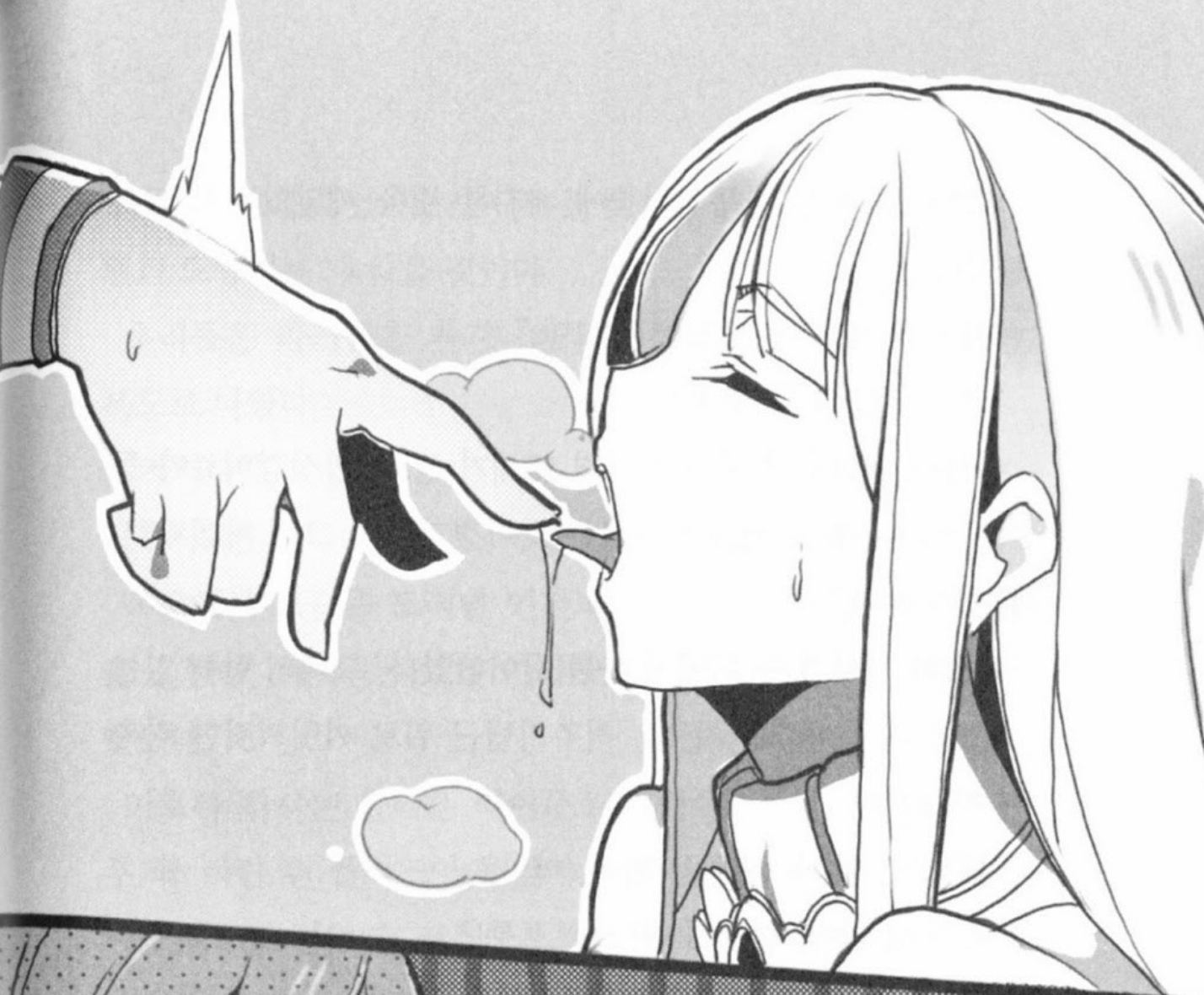
“My heart belongs only to Princess Riznah! And, also, I am a manly personal guard! I am only doing this to quench my thirst so that I may resist you both in the future!”

...What part about him was manly?

In any case, it seemed like we weren’t going to be finding a PDA for us anytime soon. It was a smarter idea to get away from the area as much as possible. We exited the locker room and entered the hallway that connected the seating area and the exits.

“There they are!”

[Over there!]



A soldier and a Tri-Walker simultaneously shouted as they noticed our entry into the halls. But Sergeant Aroha's Colion rifle was faster than their reaction. She shot the soldier and the Tri-Walker one after another, and jumped over the glowing, charred remains of the Tri-Walker. Kiske screamed in horror. I followed after Sergeant Aroha, pulling Kiske with me.

"Tch."

Sergeant Aroha had been busy honing her skills. She was rampaging through her path to the exit, shooting down everything in her way.

But then,

--Swoooooooooooooooooo--!

A loud, booming noise echoed throughout the stadium. The building vibrated along with the noise, shaking the dust out of the ceiling.

From the various monitors around the hallways, we could see the inner area of the stadium. Many scared people were huddled around the area, while Saika watched over them. Saika dismantled its plate-skirts and threw the parts into the air. The plates spun up and made a spherical formation around the edges of the stadium, creating a forcefield that surrounded the civilians. It looked like the field was encapsulating the stadium in a dome.

"What is that?!"

"I think they're about to teleport. Maybe they're using that field to protect the civilians against the Hyperspace during the warp, with the Black Magic of the ancient Asa."

"What's the Black Magic?"

"You know how the Elcro pray to Artus the White and borrow the White Magic?"

"Yes."

"In contrast, the Asa use the powers of some unknown number of beings within the Hyperspace."

"..."

Using the beings of the Hyperspace? I never knew that was even possible. I shrugged.

When it came to developing a technology relating to the Hyperspace, the biggest concern was always the corruption of the Hyperspace. The Hyperspace was home to beings of greater dimensions that were utterly incomprehensible by humanity; greater dimensions, not as in

the metaphorical sense that they have superior cultures and technology, but that they literally inhabit a world of different dimensions. And they were all extremely dangerous.

For example, imagine if we were in the 2D world, on a paper. If a being in the 3D world picked up a pencil and drew a point on the page, we could only imagine that the point had appeared from nowhere, and without an explanation. As such, making contact with otherworldly beings, those without explanations, was extremely dangerous for us. But the Asa had a way to make use of them.

“So, they use the magic to transport people, and block the corruption from the Hyperspace with that shield? The Asa have some amazing powers.”

“Of course, it’s expected of the Harakals to use such a powerful magic.”

“The caste matters?”

“The powers of the Asa depend on the bloodlines, so yes. Also, only the females are known to make use of the Black Magic, and none of the males.”

Aroha’s statement reminded me and drew my attention back to Kiske. If that was the case, then it seemed natural that the Asa culture ended up being a very matriarchal society. The males of the Asa had no strength, no magic, and the only positive seemed to be that they looked nice. But that’s a really nice positive, of course!

I sighed and let go of Kiske.

“Lezirth?”

“Sergeant Aroha, take him and run away.” I turned around. The Alliance was about to kidnap a city of people. Not only was it a war crime to kidnap civilians, the Alliance was dominated by groups whose cultures were still back in fifteenth-century Europe.

“No way! You’re thinking of going back in there to fight? The enemy has a Kishin! And she’s a seasoned Alter-Armour pilot who’s capable of moving a Kishin remotely! She’s nothing like Diablo back from the Azoran system! And not even you could easily handle a Harakal’s Black Magic!”

Despite Sergeant Aroha’s insistence, I shook my head. “I can’t let them kidnap civilians, you know?”

“Then take a hostage with you!” Sergeant Aroha pushed Kiske back to me.

I shook my head once more. A hostage wasn't going to help my situation. Even if he was the Princess's favourite, the situation did not allow being dragged down by a hostage and restricting my own movement. Also, even if the Princess and the Asa were fond of the hostage, what about the rebels?

And then, an even louder noise permeated the stadium.

* * *

Fireworks.

The stadium vibrated to a different tune-- loud music. Fireworks exploded to the skies like a fountain, and the bottom of the stadium opened up.

The stadium was multi-purpose, able to accommodate different sports such as baseball and soccer, but also musical concerts, by reforming the floor of the stadium. The floor was being controlled by someone.

Sergeant Aroha and I were taken off guard by the sight of the moving stadium floors. When the floor began rearranging, Kishin Saika too stopped moving, its attention taken by the center of the stadium.

At the center was a girl, with hazel-blond, short hair.

"L-Luise?!" I exclaimed. What in the world?!

Admiral Luise had made a personal appearance in the stadium, within the center of all attention from our enemy. She was wearing a long, one-piece dress, a hat with a wavy brim on her head. She pressed down on her hat with one hand, and waved at the camera with the other.

[What's an idol singer doing here?]

[What's going on now?]

We could clearly hear some of the confused exclamations from the civilians through the broadcast. Amongst the panicked people clearing away from the moving floors, Admiral Luise stood alone, winking at the camera. Rabbitte the Rabbit, sitting on her shoulders, also winked with by forming the expression with its LED-lit eyes.

...Was she actually going to perform in the middle of a battle?! Before that, wasn't she super shy?!

And the song...

The song was called “Supernova,” a popular new song a hundred and twenty years ago, though an ancient song at this point.

By the time my head began clicking together again, the instrumental intro had already gone by. The part with the lyrics was coming up.

Admiral Luise extended her arms high up towards the sky and began singing with more emotion than any professional singer I’d seen.

* * *

*When I was left alone amidst the dark,
You lit my path like a newborn nova,
And eyes like fire brought light to my world.
Your bright, burning spirit and mind
I fell in love with your lasting fire,
Unquenched desires, unending dreams,
Lone supernova, shining alone.*

...3...2...1...0!

*Save me from this dark, I beg you,
I asked the supernova, shining in the sky,
Brighter than a comet of wishes and hope.
But you shine alone, burning in silence,
Dreams of a girl, clouded in darkness.
Blinded by selfishness, frozen with pain,
I couldn’t see the dark around you.
Fighting the dark with burning light,
The girl fell in love with the lasting fire.
Shining alone, lone supernova,*

*I want to shine, but as two
Even if the desire burns my body.*

...3...2...1...0!

*I'll save you from the dark, and soon,
Though a lone stranger I might be,
I was saved, by your light,
Light that called me by your fire,
Dreams of a girl, like a supernova.*

* * *

“Holy crap.” Sergeant Aroha, with her jaw agape, blankly stared at the monitor.

The girl that stood on the stage to dance and sing, Luise Maynard, had a powerful and amazing voice. She might as well have been a professional singer. But why? Why sing in the first place?

“Three, two, one, zero!”

With the countdown that took the song to the back to the refrain, Admiral Luise brought her hands to her lips and kissed towards the audience(?). At the same time...

--Pwoosh!

A strange thing suddenly happened.

All the Alter-Armours that watched on simultaneously ejected their pilots into the air.

An Alter-Armour cockpit was a middleware between a human being and the mind of the Alter-Armour, a living being itself. So, as a part not native to the Alter-Armour's body, it was possible to eject the cockpit in disregard of the will of the armours.

Kishin Saika also ejected its cockpit into the distance. It flew up into the sky, smashing into the barrier field and gaining even greater force away from the stadium, disappearing into the distance.

As the Alter-Armour cockpits flew out everywhere and embedded themselves into various areas in the stadium, the Alliance army was at a complete disarray. The panicked Alliance

soldiers and rebels pulled out their guns to retaliate, but their guns had also been disabled and became paperweights.

Admiral Luise was exacting a revenge for me, back when I had also been forcibly ejected out of my Alter-Armour's cockpit. And what a stylish way to get revenge!

"Fufufu! Now this is how you do it!"

She was a little too sure of her own skills. She was so occupied in the competition with that Eiredith girl that she was losing her usual self. The shy girl had disappeared off somewhere, and the personality of a scary, provocative lady took place in her body instead, throwing a charming smile at the camera.

It was beautiful. And I was also happy. The girl who had been constantly swamped in the computer-filled basement of the Federation operations room still had a feisty spirit left in her, and I found myself grinning at the television screen.

...Wait, wasn't I forgetting something? Oh, no, Saika doesn't need its pilot to move!

I looked at Aroha. She seemed to be thinking what I had in mind.

"Let's go!"

We bolted towards the stadium.

* * *

The stadium had really been transformed into a heated concert. The beam projector now displayed a 3D broadcast, now showing an angry blonde girl shaking her fist towards the viewer.

[Gaaaaaaah! I'm going to kill you! Like, seriously kill you!] The chief of the Alliance, Eiredith, was screaming in rage.

Admiral Luise was smiling, looking around the stadium that was under her control with panicked soldiers running about. A bike appeared and raced towards her-- it was Ensign Meihowa, now wearing a biker getup with a black leather suit and sunglasses, however she found the time to change into that.

-Screeeeeeee!

With the sound of tires screeching against the stage floors, the bike turned to the side and slowed. When did she learn how to drive like that?! She spun the bike around, pivoting by

the front wheel as she performed a spinning burnout with the rear wheel while slowing to a halt in front of Admiral Luise.

The soldiers that attempted to crawl up the stadium backed away, intimidated by Ensign Meihowa's entrance. She was holding a presumably functioning Colion rifle, after all, and the Tri-Walkers from outside the stadium had joined in while blaring Federation identities. Even Kishin Saika had lost its pilot, so it seemed like a complete disaster for the Alliance who had no quick technicians to recover from the situation.

But Saika did not need its pilot within to be controlled!

"Luise!" I called her, running down the hallway.

I slammed into the stadium door, almost breaking it open. But a huge wave of civilians was on the other side, who then attempted to barge through the now-open door. Damn! I should have known that the civilians were hanging by the exits of the stadium.

"Agh!"

"Aroha! Hold onto my hand!" I grabbed Sergeant Aroha by her arms and lifted her up. Kiske got pulled up along with her. With Sergeant Aroha in my hands and Kiske around my arms, I ran up against the wall to get past the crowd safely.

"Hey! Why am I held by your hands while your friend's around your arms?!"

Sergeant Aroha was never jealous of the other girls, but Kiske seemed to be special... but that was probably my narcissism talking.

I kicked against the end of the wall, hopping over the last crowd, and landed on the stadium's front seats.

--Fwooooooosh!

A stream of fireworks exploded behind me.

I dropped Kiske and Aroha down and looked towards the stadium. Ensign Meihowa and Admiral Luise were still standing on the stage floor, and all Alter-Armours were frozen still with their pilots gone.

But Kishin Saika began moving.

The Tri-Walkers simultaneously opened fire. A hailstorm of plasma rounds rained upon the armour. Of course no amount of anti-infantry weaponry could even leave a scratch on a Kishin-- they instead fired upon the pilot outside, Princess Riznah.

“Agh!”

She controlled Saika to have it kneel down, covering her with its arms. Yet, some Tri-Walkers were equipped with smart bombs instead of plasma rounds. The bombs curved around, exploding on top of Saika’s arms.

“Kyaah!” Princess Riznah screamed, a lot more feminine than the other Asa.

Kiske was shocked. “What are you doing to the Harakal?! Cease fire! Please, stop this at once!” He bolted forward, handcuffs still on his arms. He couldn’t get very far, tripping on the stadium bench.

I followed after him, jumping from one bench to another, and landing on the stage floor. “Meihowa!”

Ensign Meihowa waved from her bike. “Lezirth! Did you manage to save Aroha?”

Sergeant Aroha walked up the stage after me, smiling coldly. “Gosh, what was that just now?”

Not only were the Alter-Armours disabled, even Kishin Saika was crippled.

I had approached Meihowa in a hurry to tell her that Kishin Saika could be moved remotely, but it seemed that there was no need. Admiral Luise used the many cameras around the stadium to learn all about Saika, planned a way to take control of the situation, and even came up with a way to make a fantastic entrance.

“That was really cool, Luise. You should be a singer!”

“Oh, Lezirth. A singer? That’s... too embarrassing. Heheh.” She looked extremely smug even as she said that.

Sergeant Aroha smiled. “Want to form a duet-- no, let’s make a band! How ‘bout that?”

Ensign Meihowa was surprised by Kiske meanwhile. “Who’s this kid?”

“An Asa. We needed a hostage, and taking the Princess’s favourite was probably the right move.”

“Huh. The Princess was a lesbian?” said Meihowa, in past tense, as if Riznah had died already. Although, a normal human being wouldn’t be able to survive a smart bomb blast.

But then,

-*Swoooooooooh!*

Kishin Saika began moving again! The air around Saika's arms began tearing apart. As space itself distorted, a group of swirls, like snail shells, shot out the distortions, flying towards us.

"What?!"

Ensign Meihowa quickly started the bike, pulling Luise on it. I grabbed Kiske and Sergeant Aroha and jumped down the stage to dodge the distortions.

"Gaaaah!"

"Aargh!"

Space distorted even further. The stadium became the focal point of dimensional collapse as more tears formed, letting creatures from the Hyperspace through.

"Oh, no."

Admiral Luise looked at Rabbitte, and Rabbitte immediately began controlling the nearby robots. The Tri-Walkers changed their targets to the swirled, snail-like beings, and fired a barrage of plasma at them. The creatures quickly fell. The plasma rifles are strong enough to burn off an unprotected human's torso, so that was expected.

But the splattered bits of the creatures on the ground began regenerating. They bubbled up and quivered, resembling shaking jellies, growing back to their original forms. It was sickening to watch.

It was the beginning of a Hyperspace corruption.

I realized why the Asa were significantly better off than the Elcro at fighting off the Federation's assault. They had the power to summon the Hyperspace beings at will. When the Hyperspace corruption takes place, humans had no options to retaliate other than blowing apart the entire planet from which the corruption began.

It was an experience all too familiar from the Letix War. Was the future of Critik-4 sealed?

"Aaaaaaaagh!"

Kishin Saika stood. It held Princess Riznah in its hands. Surrounding the Princess were tears in the dimension.

"Harakal!" Kiske screamed upon seeing Princess Riznah. It was because she was perfectly demonstrating what happens when Hyperspace corruption takes place in a living being.

Riznah's left eye had gone and her right arm was nowhere to be seen. In place of her left eye, a blue glow filled the void, and instead of her right arm, a strange tentacular growth wiggled about. The growth was almost, but not quite like her humanoid arm, and yet it moved like it was her own.

Those beings were nothing like humanoid races. Hyperspace corruption was their way of using our flesh to fuel their growth. And Princess Riznah was using their power.

“Kwaaaaah! Aaaaaagh!”

Or, perhaps not. Princess Riznah screamed. As her screams became louder, a wave of powerful force radiated out from her body. Where the waves collided with a physical object, dimensional tears formed on them and produced even more beings from the Hyperspace.

“Waaaargh! Run away!”

“Run for your life!”

I pointed my finger at the distance, where the gate from Chinatown lay after I was ejected from my Alter-Armour. Soon, Colorado broke free from the gate and returned to my hands. I grabbed the blade out of the air.

“Lezirth! We have to defeat the Princess right now! If we're too late, this entire planet will collapse from the Hyperspace corruption!” Ensign Meihowa yelled, seating Luise on her bike.

“I know this is too much to ask, but... can you do it?” Admiral Luise asked, hesitant.

For any level-headed person, the right idea would have been to get the hell out of there immediately. It was nothing short of suicide to try and fight. Yet I didn't want this beautiful paradise to be contaminated by the Hyperspace. I couldn't allow the civilians and tourists in the area to get hurt, either. Now, then...

“Alright! But please, even if I beat the crap out of that Asa lady, don't be thinking that I've lost my gentlemanly ways.” I left, leaving Kiske and Aroha with her.

A Kishin, its pilot, and the Hyperspace. I was going to try and fight them off with only my Colorado.

No matter how many times I thought it over, it was insane. But I had no choice.

“Let's go!” I charged towards Saika. The snail-creatures and tentacles blocked my path, and I activated the Sacred Sword. “Go, Colorado!”

Colorado spun into a corkscrew shape and separated, reforming into its quantized shape. I cut through the otherworldly beings and jumped towards Saika.

Saika attempted to fend me off with its arms. I created a wall of force in the air, kicked up against it and leapt over Saika's swinging arms. My only target was Princess Riznah-- I had to take her down to stop the growth of the Hyperspace corruption.

"You!" The Asa princess glared at me and clasped her hands together. Suddenly, formless but strangely menacing forces flew straight towards me, and all the snail-creatures below me changed their targets to me. All around me, shapeless objects shot to my position. I jumped back and forth through the air to dodge them, but they altered their trajectories to continue making their way towards me. They really wanted me dead!

So be it! I leapt again, spinning in every direction. While spinning, I wildly slashed with the Sacred Sword.

---Unique Skill! Schrodinger's Cat Slash!

The ability was a Kishin Art, a powerful slash that could cut down anything within the range of its attacks. Within the reach of the Sacred Sword, it could cut down anything, even gods, devils, and hypotheticals such as the Schrodinger's Cat.

One of Saika's skirt-plates levitated between Princess Riznah and I, blocking the slash. No matter! No matter how thick or strong it is, nothing could stand in the way of the Sacred Sword, which cut through anything in quantum levels! It would cross straight through the plate and slash Riznah! Or maybe even cut the plate along with it!

...But then,

---*Clink!*

The plate deflected the Sacred Sword. The plate seemed to be guarding against my slash on quantum levels.

As soon as the sword glanced off of the plate, I gave up on a direct attack and brought my attention back to the Hyperspace creatures. While my attention was briefly taken away, Saika's skirt-plates had fully protected Princess Riznah from my further attacks.

"Hmph!"

There must have been a special ability embedded into the Kishin's outer armour. Was I trusting Colorado too much? It was a great mistake to gamble on the enemy's capabilities and fight without any knowledge of them.

"Let.... Kiske... Go!" Rizinah commanded, springing bloody red and black whips from behind the plates. Instead of dodging them, I projected the Black Barrier so I could get closer. But soon, I felt a piercing pain across my chest.

The bloody whip was destroyed by the Barrier upon collision, but the black whip had broken past and slashed across my chest. I immediately dodged to the side so that the whip could not entangle me after the strike. How could there be anything that nullifies the Black Barrier?!

But that wasn't the end of it.

---*Crackle! Crunch!*

The wound on my chest began contorting. Many small tentacles formed from the open wound, breaking through the skin! In surprise, I returned Colorado to its solid form and cut the wound from my body entirely. I had to cut the afflicted flesh out of my body in order to stop the Hyperspace from further contaminating my flesh.

A fountain of blood squirted out from the fresh cut. I jumped away and closed my eyes, calming my mind and body, allowing the wound to seal by itself. I was able to stop the Hyperspace corruption from consuming my body, but it seemed too late to deal with Princess Rizinah at that point.

Kishin Saika raised its arms, forming a cross with its body, levitating up in the air. Princess Rizinah walked into its chest, where its cockpit used to be but no longer.

At this point, the only way to stop the corruption was to defeat Kishin Saika itself!

"Alright! Challenge accepted!"

I had experience fighting against Alter-Armours with my own strength, but a Kishin was my first. Yet, it was a fight I couldn't avoid if I wanted to stop the Hyperspace corruption. I leapt on the plate in front of me and jumped up to Kishin Saika, aiming for the empty spot where the cockpit was.

--Lightning Fire, Piercing Fist!



Upon landing, I punched Saika's chest, above its cockpit, and followed up with a stab from my Colorado after its quick shift into the Sacred Sword. Both the Piercing Fist and the Sacred Sword landed squarely on Saika's heart-- I hoped the shock would at least kill Princess Riznah.

To my surprise, black whips pierced out from between Saika's outer armour, or rather, seemingly passing through them like it wasn't there. It was the attack that nullified the Black Barrier.

--Algarb's Black Whip!

It was an Asa magic! I kicked Saika and propelled myself away to dodge the whip. Though I might have overestimated my Black Barrier and got hit before, I wasn't about to get hit by such a slow attack the second time.

The world seemed to spin in circles as I flipped around the air. Ugh... I'd lost too much blood from before.

I landed back on the ground and looked up. Saika was still levitating upwards, now too far away for me to attempt another attack. I could use my powers to levitate myself up, too, but that would put me on an easy path for Saika to kill me effortlessly.

"Lezirth!"

Sergeant Aroha appeared with a bike of her own-- it was a mystery where she got a bike in the mean time. I quickly jumped on the bike behind her and steadied myself by holding onto her waist.

"Are you alright, Lezirth?"

"Agh... Let's just go!"

I had lost a lot of blood and the pain was getting worse. Embarrassingly, I couldn't do anything about the Princess anymore.

[Don't make me laugh! Did you believe I would let you out of here alive?! My arm! And my eyes! And Kiske! Return all of them back to me!] Princess Riznah screamed, enraged.

Damn! She was going to have a fight to the death right here!

But then,

--*Boooooom!*

A huge explosion engulfed Saika and the Kishin fell down to the ground.

It was a shot from a cruiser in the space above. It seemed that Admiral Luise's hacks had reached the ships above us.

Even the secondary armament of cruisers were capable of wiping out an entire biome from a land mass. Kishins were no less likely to take the hits too well. I could smell the thick ozone gas from the explosion from here-- It wasn't safe to get near the blast zone.

[Gaaah! Eiredith, do something! I thought you're supposed to be a genius?!] Princess Riznah grumbled out loud.

The girl called Eiredith angrily argued through the radio. [This has nothing to do with smarts! I can't beat a physical hardware hacking of our Hyperspace communicators! Do you maybe see Rabbitte the Rabbit there? If you do, smash it into little pieces! There's nothing else that could physically hack our system!]

[What the hell is that? How should I know if there's something like that around here?!]

Thanks to Admiral Luise, once again, I gained some breathing room. I immediately fled the scene with Sergeant Aroha.

* * *

Outside of the stadium, I could see the rebel forces in complete disarray. Mayer was among them.

"You! What have you done in here?!" Mayer aimed his Colion pistol at me. I assumed that his pistol was safely disarmed through Admiral Luise's sabotage.

"Put that thing down, Mayer. Also, give me your PDA."

"What?"

"Give me the Alliance PDA."

"You crazy bastard! You know I'm with the rebels, right?!" Mayer glared in suspicion.

Well, it could have looked like I was threatening one of the leading figures of the enemy to give me access to their secure lines. But right now, it wasn't a threat-- it was a plea.

"If we don't do something about this, all of Critik-4 is going to be corrupted by the Hyperspace. Remember the Letix? They're also one of the Hyperspace creatures, so it's the exact same thing as the Letix corruption. Do you remember what we needed to do any time the Letix spreads on a planet?"

“They had to wipe the entire planet with quantum torpedoes.”

“Right, when the entire planet is gone, you’re not gonna have either the Federation government or the free government to worry about. They’re going to be floating in space with the stars very soon.” I extended a hand towards Mayer.

Mayer hesitated for a short while, but soon took a PDA from one of his lackeys and gave it to me. “What a piece of crap! After all the things that the Federation had done to us... damnit!” Mayer shook his head, questioning what’s he’d just done. He had no choice but to comply, however; no matter how evil the Federation was to him, it was way worse to see his own nation meet its end.

“Just consider yourself unlucky.” I tapped Mayer on his shoulder and put the headphones in my ears.

Then, the stadium had begun crumbling down. As the Hyperspace corruption grew, the very foundation of the structure seemed to have weakened to the point where it couldn’t maintain itself.

[Run!]

[Aaaargh!]

Many panicked screams were heard over the Alliance channels. Kasik was particularly loud over the channel. [This can’t be happening! I started the rebellion for it to end like this?!]

Suddenly, within Kasik’s channel view, a fleshless arm appeared and covered up Kasik’s camera. Since the camera appeared to be on his head, the arm seemed to be coming from the center of his chest or his neck. Following gurgling, grinding sounds from his voice channel, blood splattered onto the camera. I quickly turned his channel off. Soon, Kasik’s status was displayed as KIA.

“Lezirth! Hold on tight!”

“Wait, can’t I be the one driving?” I asked, still dangling behind Sergeant Aroha. But she was too focused on driving away from the stadium as quickly as possible to care. I had no choice but to hold onto her at that speed. Sergeant Aroha’s hair shook wildly in the wind, getting in my face.

“Wah! Lezirth, watch where you put your hands!”

“But this is about as safe as it gets! I’ll move them further up if you keep complaining!”

“Try it if you dare!”

“What? How innocent do you think I am? You know, I had more ladies after me than there are stars in the entire universe!”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever! Let’s go.” Sergeant Aroha giggled mockingly. She went against the road leading into the stadium. There were many other vehicles fleeing the area, buses and military machines that carried civilians and soldiers away. Sergeant Aroha expertly weaved around them to outrun them.

Sergeant Aroha probably believed that I didn’t dare move my hands around in this situation. If I distracted her, she could lose her focus and run into a truck, and probably killing us both! But that’s a problem for a common man, not for a superhuman psionic being like I am! That’s right! Time to move my hands where ever I feel like it! I’ll touch anything and everything I can!

... It came to my attention that I was probably feeling competitive in the stupidest thing imaginable, but there were just certain things that a man couldn’t back down from!

And so I raised my hold up her body!

...

... But some heavy, squishy object blocked my arms and stopped my arms’ progress. I seemed to have underestimated her and overshot the horizontal distance that my arms were allowed to move. If I could just have more room to move around the object...

“.....”

“.....Uh, um... sorry, I think I took it too far.”

“Dummy.” Sergeant Aroha shot a look at me. I thought I caught a glimpse of her eyes being... moist.

But then,

---Swooooooooooh!

The air around us began vibrating.

[This is a demand to the Federation agents!] The Alliance’s Kishin, Saika, was yelling. More specifically, it was the pilot within Saika, Princess Riznah. [Hand over Rabbitte-the-Rabbit-or-whatever to me! And cease your control over the cruisers! Free Kiske and any other Asa

you have taken hostage! If you do not listen to these three demands, every living thing in the Critik system will become food for the Archdemon!]

... What happened to the propaganda tactic? They resorted to threats?!

Even as Saika spoke, the cruiser continued firing its secondary cannons at Saika. Saika defended against the bombardment by creating another force field with the six skirt-plates, forming a dome. Saika couldn't retaliate as the cruiser was likely filled with Alliance soldiers and other Asa, and so it was forced to passively guard against the cruiser.

Princess Riznah must have been angry that we had presumably taken over the cruiser by force, keeping the Alliance soldiers and the Asa hostage. She was threatening that, if we were holding her troops hostage, then she'd be taking the entire planet hostage in turn.

"Luise wouldn't fall for her threat, but... no, she simply can't fall for it. Right now, the Hyperspace corruption spread so far that not even a Harakal could easily maintain control over it. That's how unstable the Asa Black Magic is. It's extremely destructive, but it always manages to cause problems because it's indomitable."

"Luise wouldn't be fooled, but... I don't like where this is headed."

I held onto Sergeant Aroha, looking at the collapsing stadium in the distance. The speed of the corruption was increasing every moment.

By the Federation's standard practice, the planet was a prime target for complete destruction via quantum torpedoes. The emerald oceans of Critik-4, its artificial coral reefs, seaside resorts, casino hotels, circuses, ski resorts three thousand meters up above sea level, everything was about to be wiped out. And all the people on it-- at least a million who belonged to the Federation alone, and billions more of natives of this planet. Though allowing the corruption to consume the planet was still a gruesome end for the inhabitants, destroying the planet with a weapon of mass destruction was just...

"..."

Then, the PDA crackled, switching itself to Federation channels.

[Lezirth!] Admiral Luise called.

[Luise! Where are you?!]

[I'm on an Alter-Gunship! I'll be right there!]

Soon, an Alter-Armour approached us. It was called a gunship because a transport module was attached on its side, restricting it to a transport gunship.

“Alright, hold on!”

Sergeant Aroha smashed against the guard rail beside us on purpose, using the force of impact to fling us into the gunship. I used my powers to absorb the ensuing crash against the gunship’s floor and eased Sergeant Aroha’s dynamic entry.

“That was too risky!” Ensign Meihowa was sitting in the pilot’s seat, looking at Sergeant Aroha and I. Admiral Luise was controlling the cruiser with Rabbitte by her side.

The girl named Eiredith seemed to be continuing her efforts to return her control over the cruiser, but traditional long-distance hacking could only affect the communication systems at the application level. Rabbitte the Rabbit, instead, affected the entire system down to the hardware. This was possible because Rabbitte itself contained an Alter Core, its power matching a Major-level Alter-Armour. Rabbitte the Rabbit was a one-of-a-kind technology, a computer made of Letix cells.

Not even the best hacker in the universe could regain control with traditional hacking methods.

“At this rate, all of Critik-4 will be destroyed! What should we do?”

“We’re going to have Federation backup incoming, but... that’s going to make things worse, isn’t it?” Admiral Luise used her PDA to show the location of the Federation forces at the time. The Federation marines had already entered the boundaries of the Critik system through Hyperspace warp. As soon as they’d realize the planet was being consumed by the Hyperspace corruption, they could impatiently shoot a quantum torpedo to end the problem quickly.

“If you were really selected by the Black Sisters... wouldn’t it be possible?” Kiske asked, still handcuffed. He was, of course, talking to Sergeant Aroha.

“Maybe, but...” Sergeant Aroha shrugged, folding her bike for storage.

“What did he mean?” I asked.

Ensign Meihowa answered in Aroha’s place. “The reason why the Asa haven’t killed themselves off despite using the Black Magic is said to be thanks to the Black Sisters taking care of Hyperspace corruption.”

“You can ‘take care of Hyperspace corruption’?!”

So far in history, the only way humanity had dealt with the Letix or Hyperspace corruption was via purification by fire-- destroying individual cells with heat, killing it and preventing regeneration. And I heard now that wasn't the only way.

“Pah... you want me to use an Asa's ability, huh?” Sergeant Aroha sighed.

I was reminded of her look when she had seen her dad's picture on a magazine. Her history with the Asa had given her a scar. Was it going to be too much for her to recollect her memory from those times?

Ensign Meihowa playfully punched Sergeant Aroha's back. “Sorry, Aroha. We have Luise on her side, so maybe we can get through this without the Federation knowing.”

“Yeah, sure, but... phew. I'm being asked to use an Asa power after everything I said about the Asa.”

“S-sorry, Sergeant, I don't want to make you do it, but...”

Even if she didn't like it, she had to try it if we were to have any chance of stopping the corruption.

When Sergeant Aroha saw my grave expression, she smiled. “...I learned it when I was a little kid, so don't expect too much out of it.” She shook her head. Still, she smiled like her usual self. “If you can do something about Kishin Saika, I'll try. But I might make a mistake, so don't depend too much on it, okay?”

Good. Now, what was I going to do about Kishin Saika?

The Federation communication channels reopened at that moment.

[Lezirth!]

In the channel was my roommate, Pencolt, whose weight seemed to have returned to its original state.

“Pencolt!”

[Damn! They went and did it! Our vacation's done for!]

“That's really sad news.” I grimaced. The vacation was over for me, too.

Pencolt was wearing an assault diving gear, standing by the entrance to the drop pods.

Behind him was an Alter-Armour, registered as Ensign Meihowa's belonging-- Dawnbringer Minor. It was the machine that absorbed approximately five percent of the original Dawnbringer's Alter Core, back in the battle in the Azoran system, now sitting in the drop pod with an assault gear.

[I'll be shooting that thing unmanned to your location, so make sure you get it, yeah? The coordinates will be C-4-12500, 4800! Take it and make sure you're alive until we get there! We'll save you soon!] said Pencolt, sending Dawnbringer Minor out of the cruiser.

Our location was 12496, 4801. We were pretty close to the announced destination of Dawnbringer Minor.

"Lezirth! As soon as we retrieve Dawnbringer Minor, we need to defeat Kishin Saika and end the Hyperspace corruption! If we don't... the Federation will probably decide to destroy Critik-4!" Ensign Meihowa summarized, piloting the gunship towards the destination.

"How much time do we have?"

"Dawnbringer Minor will arrive within ten minutes to the destination! But about twenty minutes after that... Federation cruisers will enter bombardment range of Critik-4!"

Thus, I had only twenty minutes to defeat Kishin Saika and stop the Hyperspace corruption.

I quickly gathered various energy gels and drinks to recover my strength and equipped myself with a combat vest from storage. Sergeant Aroha wore the same vest and a helmet to prepare herself.

"It'll be a long run." I pointed at the nearby mall below us. "Ensign Meihowa! Energy gels first!"

"Roger. We'll be fighting against the Hyperspace this time... go with Sergeant Aroha."

"...Roger."

"And for Aroha, here." Ensign Meihowa took a military spade that hung on a wall and handed it over to Sergeant Aroha. Sergeant Aroha looked confused, but took it without questioning. "You'll need it, eventually."

"Ah.... alright! Okay!" Sergeant Aroha nodded.

Ensign Meihowa pointed at me and gestured to come over. When I walked over, Ensign Meihowa whispered in my ears quietly, "Lezirth. You can't do the weird things that you did to me to Aroha, alright?"

“...What?”

“Even if Aroha’s like that, she’s pretty pure and innocent.”

...What were Ensign Meihowa’s standards for ‘pure and innocent’? You’d probably need a long stick that you use for pole vaults to jump the hurdle needed to be impure!

“Wait, wait, what did I ever do to you?!”

Ensign Meihowa blushed at my response. “I-if you don’t recall anything, that’s fine, too, I’m sure you’ll handle it. Well, it’s not like Aroha has wings.” She lightly jabbed at my chest as she spoke.

And then, a red comet grew larger and larger in the skies.

Dawnbringer Minor was entering the planet’s atmosphere.

Now... it’s time to begin!

Chapter 03: Dawnbringer VS Saika

Part 1

The landed Dawnbringer Minor still had room for just one person. Unfortunately, only specially designed Alter-Armours and Alter-Gunships allowed for double-seater or tandem configurations, and these types of land combat models usually did not. The small cockpit space was inevitable for Minion or Minor-class Armours, after all.

I had to get in the pilot seat first and Sergeant Aroha had to sit on top of me. She hesitated before taking a seat, looking around the cockpit. “Lezirth... this is what Meihowa had to co-pilot? You said 'no' when I asked if you wanted to get in the Spider APC with me!”

“Get in, quickly! There’s no time to talk about this! We only have twenty minutes to defeat Saika and cleanse the Hyperspace corruption from the area.”

“Alright, fine! Damn it!” Sergeant Aroha reluctantly sat on my lap, grumbling. I felt an enveloping pressure around my legs.

...But, wouldn’t it have been more appropriate to sit in parallel to my own direction?

Sergeant Aroha sat on my legs, facing towards me. She continued to mutter to herself, her cheeks turning rosy. “I never thought you’d be this perverted, Lezirth. I can’t believe you fought Diablo while Meihowa sat in this position for the whole fight.”

“But, uh, wait... Sergeant?”

“Hey, c-careful! You’re breathing in my face as you talk.”

I-I’m sweating all over! Sweat dropped from the bottom of my chin, flew onto Sergeant Aroha’s chest, and soon disappeared down into the valley in the middle.

Sergeant Aroha turned increasingly redder and pouted. “I swear, there’s no helping you. Well, whatever-- I understand, Lezirth.”

“No, you don’t-- ngh... s-stop it! Stop squeezing on my sides with your thighs!”

“Hold on, I’m trying to steady myself so I don’t fall off.” Sergeant Aroha answered bluntly.

I honestly did prefer to have her be this way while I piloted the vehicle. ...Piloting with her back against me was fine, too, but this had its own benefits.

But the reason I needed to pilot in tandem with another was because I needed the help. To get any help, it would have been more helpful for her to turn around.

But then, as Dawnbringer Minor stood up, the cockpit shook wildly. When the body of the Armour accelerates at great rates, ten G to twenty G, the G-cancelers should normally activate to reduce the cockpit shaking, but those systems were unavailable during the starting sequence of the Armour.

As the cockpit shook, so did Sergeant Aroha.

As her body shook, parts of her body, the ones that carried a huge portion of her total momentum back when we were on the bike, shook in accordance to the natural order (?) of physics and struck my face.

“.....”

Have you ever seen some old murder mystery films, where the murderer suffocates the victim to death by pressing a pillow to the victim’s face? For some reason, the thought flashed through my mind at that moment.

I... I can’t breathe!

[What are you two doing?! We don’t have much time, so get moving!] Ensign Meihowa yelled over the communicator. The screen turned on, too, so she could see what Sergeant Aroha and I were doing... [Wh...What are you doing?!]

“Oh, Lezirth... careful with your teeth, there. I said that hurts, geez!” Sergeant Aroha giggled, unexpectedly. Oh no, she was going to end my social life forever!

“Sergeant Aroha! T-turn around already!”

“Turn around? Are you saying that you want to...”

I immediately let go of the controls and put my hands over her mouth. I had to stop her from saying anything crazy at all costs!

“Hpfh! A-alright, I get it! Don’t be so rough on me, Lezirth!”

[What are you people doing?!] Admiral Luise joined in the yelling.

Damn it, what did I do?! We wasted a minute with this already!

“Okay, Aroha! Open those energy gels and insert them into the bottom of the cockpit deck!”

“Roger!” Sergeant Aroha began her work, filling Dawnbringer Minor with energy. She leaned down to reach the bottom of the deck, and her hips...

No, shut up! I can’t afford to be distracted! It’s not the time to play around!

“Let’s go, Dawnbringer Minor!”

Dawnbringer Minor became fully operational, getting a running start. It sprinted forward, gaining momentum for a great leap in the air towards the stadium and Kishin Saika, who had been surrounded by the Hyperspace Corruption while fighting off the attacks from the cruisers above.

Kishin Saika turned its attention to us. [Fools! What do you wish to accomplish with that flimsy Armour?]

Saika flung the deadly discs from its metal skirt. Dawnbringer Minor evaded it mid-air, kicking against the disc to spin around. I could feel the huge acceleration weighing down on us, but the G-canceler mitigated any danger. I continued approaching Saika without slowing down.

[Hmph! Pretty good.]

[I’ll end this quickly since we don’t have time!]

Saika’s height was about thirty-eight meters, while Dawnbringer Minor was a mere fourteen. There was a massive size difference between the two Armours-- as we approached each other, the difference became far more noticeable.

“Are you gonna be fine, Lezirth?” Sergeant Aroha asked, probably intimidated.

But I had a past record of fighting Diablo with an even smaller Armour.

Of course, my current opponent was a far more competent pilot than Diablo’s. And I hadn’t been at my top condition after losing a lot of blood from a previous fight, where I rushed to kill Princess Riznah without knowing of her abilities, and then got punished by being forced to cut off a part of my body.

Still, I had to toughen up. Nobody wanted to see Critik-4 and its millions of inhabitants die. “Don’t worry, just believe in me! I fought Diablo with a Minion-class, remember?”

I used the momentum from jumping off of throwing discs and rolled forward. Many more skirt-bits flew towards us to cut Dawnbringer Minor into pieces, but they were too predictable to overwhelm my piloting abilities. I hopped around, disc to disc, evading the

rapid assault. These kinds of barrages were difficult to evade upon a glance, but the density of the barrage actually allowed me to form a safe path through it by pushing away and causing a chain reaction of projectiles colliding against each other.

And so, Dawnbringer Minor dove straight through the metal storm and approached closer to Saika.

Kishin Saika immediately accelerated backwards.

[Aaaaaaagh!] Princess Riznah suddenly screamed. Hmm? Did I really scare her that much by managing to get close to her? [Agh! H-hold on! Time out!] She requested.

Her reaction was so sudden and strange that I froze in place for a few seconds. “What’s she saying?”

“Saika’s cockpit was ejected, right? Wasn’t she remotely controlling Saika from point-blank range?”

“Ah.” I realized what had happened thanks to Sergeant Aroha.

Cockpits that weren’t equipped with G-cancelers left the pilot’s own constitution to resist the effects of acceleration. Superhumans like me would have no problem, but Asa magic must have been too destructive and unwieldy for such utilitarian uses.

Then, this battle was already closer to victory for us. Before when I had fought Diablo, although the pilot had laughably awful maneuvers compared to Saika, it was at least extremely resilient against my attacks. This fight was very different-- although Princess Riznah was far more skilled, since Saika’s cockpit was no longer properly in place, a small amount of force on Saika could easily kill the Princess. The Kishin would be mostly unharmed, but the pilot within would be violently pulled apart as if the cockpit were a centrifugal separator.

“Huh! Then we pretty much won already!”

[Kuh!]

The fate of this match was decided in the moment she began fighting without a cockpit! Saika wasn’t even able to withstand its own speed. It felt like an empty victory, but a win’s a win!

I glared at Saika. “Surrender, if you don’t want to become a bloody mess!”

[D-don’t make me laugh! I could withstand this much, if I put in a little more effort...]

Before she finished, I kicked at Saika. It was a psionically charged kick that could connect up to a hundred meters farther than it appears to be able.

Saika shot up into the air to dodge my kick, and another scream echoed from within.

“You think fruits could avoid being crushed in a juicer if they put in a little more effort to it? Give up already! It’s terribly wasteful for a fine lady like you to go on a suicide charge like this! You should really help me with the Hyperspace corruption first--”

“Lezirth! Are you really going to let a Harakal live? The Harakal is the Asa’s pride! Even if you let her live today, she’ll come back for you as long as they live! Once you prove that you’re more skilled than a Harakal, the only thing you can do with her is kill her for good or impregnate her!”

I-- Hey, what was that just now? I thought I must have misheard her somehow. I almost thought Sergeant Aroha had spoken something incredibly unspeakable.

Ensign Meihowa joined in to urge me further. [Lezirth! Now’s the best chance you’ll ever get! Kill her now and take the Kishin for yourself! Even if it’s different from Dawnbringer, you should have an easier time finding Dawnbringer’s Alter Core with it!]

The ladies were getting restless. But I shook my head.

Was I letting her live simply because she was a lady? No, it was nothing like that this time. The Harakal had caused a Hyperspace corruption that killed many people, and she was a leader figure of my enemy. She was a war criminal who participated in kidnapping noncombatants. Yet, there was a great reason for me to let her live.

“If we take the Kishin, then our identity will definitely be discovered. I don’t like that.” I spoke into the communicator.

Suddenly, I felt something flying at me from behind. I immediately jumped away.

--*Kaboom*!

A hail of cannon fire came from the cruiser at a distance. Damn, did we lose control over it?

[Riznah! Are you okay?] The Alliance chief known as Eiredith asked Riznah.

Ah, I almost forgot that my PDA was still in Alliance channels. But how could I overhear them? When did William Mayer have the right to a general-level security? Had Admiral Luise already have a hand in this?

[Gah! I need the cockpit back! And a medical device! I have little time before the corruption overtakes me!]

I could see Princess Riznah on the channel view. Her left eye and arm had gone, filled in with some sort of Hyperspace beings. Unlike me, who had to sever the affected area to be rid of it, Princess Riznah had stopped the injury by combining with a symbiotic parasite. It couldn't have been much safer, however.

[I'll send a new cockpit with a Portable Medic inside it! It'll be a special version that can't be hacked! Do you think you can reinstall the cockpit with that guy after you?]

[To be honest... it's going to be difficult! He's a real monster! He mowed down Hyperspace creatures like grass with his own power, and he flew past my Skirt Bit Formation like it wasn't even there! He must be the man who defeated Tenseron in Azoran!]

[The Federation had a pilot with that skill level? It's not ringing any bells! If it's not an Old Blood, or the Children of Letix, who could have such a power?]

Hm? I was indeed one of the Children of Letix, but what was the Old Blood? Maybe they were calling the True Blood as the Old Blood instead? Fanatics of the Cult of Humanism?

While they talked, an object ejected from the cruiser and began falling down. It must have been that cockpit.

"The best time to strike is going to be when they're exchanging the cockpit, Lezirth." Sergeant Aroha advised. Indeed, Saika was going to be completely exposed at that stage.

If we took Saika then we were in danger of making our identities known, but I had no choice. I couldn't just let my enemy repair her biggest weakness right in front of me.

I bided my time, dodging or blocking the cruiser's bombardment, waiting for the new cockpit to approach. Saika raised its hand and grabbed the cockpit. But, to place that in its chest, Princess Riznah had to get out first to make room. And if I attacked during that time... she was surely going to die.

I squeezed on the controls, waiting for my time. But then...

--*Crash!*

On the ground below me, where the stadium once stood and was replaced with the Hyperspace warp, a huge arm ripped through the ground and reached into the air. It was about forty meters long, appearing to be composed of a material resembling obsidian. If it

were real obsidian, it would have shattered to pieces if it attempted to make any arm-like movements, and it did not.

--Gwuuaaaaaahh!!

An unseen creature below the monstrous arm cried. Then, a powerful force erupted and shook the earth. It was as if the ground was a carpet and the arm was dusting it off, clearing the earth with the magnitude of a 9.0 earthquake.

The atmosphere shook in unison. A great tornado formed in the middle, causing the snail-like beings and tentacles to be flung around in the air and get concentrated into the center of the stadium.

“Gah!” I kicked away the arm that nearly grabbed me and dodged to the side. The kick from Dawnbringer Minor could knock away a proper Kishin if it properly connected, but the monstrous arm did not seem to be fazed.

“What on earth is that?!” Sergeant Aroha screamed.

I raised my altitude to escape the black arm.

The Hyperspace creatures were being eaten. It was like a humpback whale inhaling in a group of krills-- drinking, almost, instead of eating, like a huge, huge creature would when consuming a much more insignificant creature. Even those snail creatures were great annoyances to me, so I couldn't imagine what manner of creature would feed on them so effortlessly.

[Archdemon?!]

“Archdemon!”

Princess Riznah and Sergeant Aroha shouted simultaneously.

“It's an emergency, Lezirth! A higher-form Hyperspace creature appeared!”

“Really? How much trouble am I in?”

“If we can't take that thing down, then the portal is going to grow large enough to cover the entirety of Critik-4 with Hyperspace creatures! Even if I use my ability... if something like an Archdemon shows up, it's useless! We're already at the worst possible level of the Hyperspace corruption! Even the Black Sisters would give up on this star.”

“I have to defeat that creature to stop the Hyperspace corruption, then?” I asked, glancing to my side.

Princess Riznah was still holding onto the cockpit, watching for my next move. She couldn't replace the cockpit with me around, since she could be killed the moment she decides to do so.

I gestured at her to go ahead.

"Lezirth!"

"I'm going to take care of this creature first! Saika comes after!"

"But the Asa hate being shown mercy by males! If you do..."

"Let's just say I'm taunting her, alright?" I escaped the argument, focusing on my next problem.

The Archdemon had both of its arms out of the torn ground in the stadium, and it was struggling to exit the Hyperspace and into our world. The portal became larger with every movement.

"Here I am!"

--Kishin Arts! Lighting-Fire Piercing Palm!

Dawnbringer Minor enveloped its hand with an electric field, creating a trail of plasma, and struck the Archdemon with its palm. The attack landed on the Archdemon as it attempted to break through the portal. The surroundings ionized, creating arcing lightnings between the snail-creatures that have yet to be sucked into the portal.

Dawnbringer Minor landed on the ground, clear of anything other than burnt ashes of the creatures. The attack had wiped the Hyperspace corruption deep below the earth, but the tear on the ground was unaffected. The Archdemon refused to budge from there even after my punch.

--*Ka-ha!*

The Archdemon made a strange sound, almost like a sneer. Then, the scale-like coverings on the monster's wrist stood up one by one, releasing a countless number of eye-like objects from beneath. The eyes inexplicably hovered in the air like a projected hologram, and then they began firing a burst of light in unison!

"Hmph!"

Dawnbringer Minor evaded left and right while creating a Black Barrier to defend against the attack. I remembered what had happened against the Black Whip so I didn't solely trust the shielding to save myself.

--*Bam!*

And it was as strong as I expected! Earth around me turned to steam and the asphalt turned into liquid. The sea created a small hurricane as the water evaporated violently. Decorative trees were uprooted by the strong wind.

"Stop this madness!"

--Kishin Arts! Lightning-Fire Piercing Fist!

From a great distance, the fist made from the refined power of mind reached forth and struck the Archdemon's arm. A pillar of fire was created in the fist's wake from the plasmified air.

An explosion engulfed the Archdemon's wrist, and the huge, monstrous arm slowly fell to the ground like an ancient tree being cut down. The ground shook and a dust cloud emerged when the arm finally fell.

But soon, the arm moved again.

Hmph! It was an attack powerful enough that I was almost worried if I were going to be safe, by performing that attack on ground and not in space. I had no chance of defeating this if I couldn't bring it into space so that the subconscious of the Alter-Armour does not inhibit its power.

--*Kwooooh!*

"Huh?! What's going on now?!" Sergeant Aroha became alarmed by the flashing panels within the cockpit. It was her first time being in here, after all.

The Armour stood strong even after I had used two powerful Kishin Arts. Of course, I couldn't be anywhere near my original power with only five percent of Dawnbringer's Alter-Core. My abilities were doing nothing compared to the days with the original Dawnbringer.

"The gel, Aroha! Right now!"

“R-roger!” She used the sharp edge of the military shovel from Ensign Meihowa to smash open the input port for the energy gels and squeezed the gels inside. Dawnbringer Minor returned to its strength soon.

‘Okay, good!’

The shovel had made her a lot quicker than Ensign Meihowa was. Dawnbringer Minor’s base strength was better off this time, too, so we were at a much better state than the last time.

--*Kwaaaaah!*

The Archdemon shook back and forth. The ground shook in response and the portal became bigger once more. Heat from the surroundings began vanishing into the Archdemon’s arm. Spectral analysis showed that the arm was absorbing energy, while the inside of the arm was at absolute zero temperature.

‘Absolute zero?’

The temperature itself wasn’t the issue. For my space-capable Alter-Armour, it was a temperature I could withstand. But considering the conceptual impossibility of causing anything to be lowered to absolute zero temperature, I couldn’t imagine what kind of power the Archdemon may have possessed.

“Agh!”

The arm alone easily had the strength to destroy the entire planet.

[Hey, you!] Princess Riznah called, using a public channel. Saika must have completed the cockpit replacement while I was fighting the Archdemon. [Yes, you!]

“Hey, Princess---... Huh.” I quietly watched as the screen showed the video stream of her getting her eye and her arm being replaced by the medical robot. The remote-controlled medical bot, the Portal Medic, was attaching a cyborg arm and an eye.

She completed the surgery that quickly? It must have been painful!

But the Princess only looked slightly uncomfortable, and the look of pain was nowhere on her face. She casually continued, [The Archdemon’s defensive capabilities are much like the Kishin! If you want to annihilate that creature, you can’t leave it on the ground! If we do not bring the fight to space, then the Kishins will hold back in fear of destroying a planet.]

“What of it?”

[Kishin Saika’s specialty is teleportation. I will bring the Archdemon to space. That wastes a lot of my energy, so we will need to destroy it together. Understand?]

“So we’re going to be temporary allies until we beat the Archdemon?”

[Yes! And I know that you spared my life. That is the most terrible insult to me, but... I am still thankful. But we will have a proper conclusion to our fight later!]

Sergeant Aroha scoffed in response. “She knows that she was spared and she still talks big! Lezirth, just ignore her!”

I shook my head. “Alright, fine, we’ll destroy the Archdemon first!”

Sergeant Aroha looked bewildered when I accepted the alliance. “You’ll regret it! How can you be so kind to an Asa?”

“It’s fine-- I have a plan of my own!” I reassured her, landing on the edge of the stadium area. I picked up an item for my plan-- I was ready for anything with it.

[Let’s begin!]

Kishin Saika bolted up into the skies. It looked like the old Hydrazine-fueled rockets pushing the earth back with a great force as it elevated into the air.

Saika stopped mid-air and spread its arms. Its skirt-like parts separated apart, shooting off in the areas around the stadium’s edges, encircling the Archdemon. Meanwhile, I took the monstrous arm’s attention, preventing it from reacting to Saika’s actions.

[Kishin Arts, activate! Forced Teleportation!]

As Saika cried, the parts embedded around the Archdemon emitted a light.

I quickly fled the circle. Even if I were allied with Saika, I wasn’t about to expose Dawnbringer Minor and myself to an unknown Kishin Art.

I had to admit, I had made a major mistake.

The activation of the Kishin Art had already been done when the metal circle was created. Before I knew where I was, Dawnbringer Minor and the Archdemon were moved into space.

“Damn!”

[I'll attack from here, but don't blame me if you get hit and die from it!] The Asa princess said cheekily. Saika was already on the ground by this time.

[Thundergod Saika can switch places between itself and any of its Skirt Bits! When the Skirt Bit Formation is formed to perform this ability, its movement is said to be discordant, hence the full name of Discordant Thundergod! You have to be careful!] Ensign Meihowa warned, but it was too late. I had to react against Saika's preparations rather than its activation, but that chance was gone.

The Archdemon seemed to be panicking, unaware of what had just happened. It was quite a humongous creature. I thought the arm was only about forty meters, but with the Archdemon out in space, I could see that the full length was more than sixty meters. The whole body was, including the tail, maybe two hundred meters. It looked like... a deformed, giant dinosaur? Almost like the monsters from monster movies?

--Kishin Arts! Lightspeed Death Formation!

Saika raised its arms into the air and activated a Kishin Art. Earth, machineries, and various debris levitated into the air, and were soon engulfed in a sphere of light centered on Saika's hands. The ball of light suddenly accelerated to near-lightspeed, appearing as a beam exiting the atmosphere of the planet.

Near-lightspeed objects with high density could destroy the biosphere of a planet. By colliding with the atmosphere, the object could explode from its own speed, and the resulting force could wipe the surface clean. This could happen even if the object headed towards space, rather than the ground. But thankfully, the projectile was teleported outside of the atmosphere first before being set in course towards Dawnbringer Minor and the Archdemon.

[Stop the Archdemon from dodging the projectile!]

"That *****! Hey, you ***** *****!" Sergeant Aroha began screaming words that were too embarrassing to be heard.

It was obvious that she was trying to be rid of Dawnbringer Minor as well as the Archdemon, but Princess Riznah was bold enough to ask me to control the Archdemon into getting hit!

And then, I felt a vibration, though that couldn't have been possible in space.

The near-light-speed projectile of debris struck the Archdemon's body, causing a violent explosion. The extreme speed and force of the collision caused nuclear fission, causing a massive radiation. People on the surface could probably see an aurora happening in this direction.

I realized that I would die too if I idly stood around, so I prepared to dodge Saika's attacks.

-- Dance of Discord!

The sight of the world changed its colours. Glowing points flashed in various locations around the battlefield, marking the valid travel locations with projected beacons of my mind. I had placed two hundred of these beacons. Now, I could travel to them in order!

Commence chained teleport!

Dawnbringer Minor activated its teleportation device. It teleported to predetermined locations in space, dodging the projectiles from Saika and blocking the Archdemon's path. The Archdemon struggled to escape the bombardment even as it got repeatedly struck by attacks that could destroy a star, but I kept it down by striking it with more Piercing Fist.

All of these attacks were enough to destroy multiple planets, but the Archdemon was glancing off the blows by leaking some of the damaging force into the Hyperspace.

--Alert! Alter-Armour energy level is dropping!

--Alert! Reaction levels exceeding capacity!

Dawnbringer Minor was struggling to keep up! Sergeant Aroha cursed obnoxiously, while hurriedly shoving more energy gels into Dawnbringer Minor. It was a nice sight, seeing her lean forward in the process and exposing the curves of her back. She was also on my lap at the moment, so...

"Uh-- L--Lezirth?" Sergeant Aroha blushed and turned around to stare at me. She seemed to have a lot to say but couldn't speak any of them.

"Ah!"

'What a time to be distracted-- right in the crossroads between life and death!'

I continued jumping through space with the Dance of Discord and throwing punches at the Archdemon. The energy level warnings continued just as much, but I trusted Sergeant Aroha and kept on pushing Dawnbringer Minor to its limits.

The Archdemon attempted to return the favour and fired a ray of light. I did not dodge, but instead created a Blue Barrier to reflect and strike back at the Archdemon.

--*Kweeeaaaaagh!*

I heard the Archdemon scream in agony, despite my senses telling me that I couldn't hear sounds through space.

"Take this!"

From the eyes attached on Dawnbringer's shoulders, I used--

--Kishin Arts! Anguish of the Lion King!

A focused wave of electrical energy arced to the Archdemon. And then--

--Ascend!

Dawnbringer Minor followed the arc with the Piercing Fist! The plasma storm and the punch combined to spray and inject deadly plasma into the Archdemon's body.

--Ascended Kishin Arts! Aurora Slash!

Following up on the last attack was a spinning kick from Dawnbringer Minor. Somehow, despite the size of Dawnbringer Minor, the Archdemon's back exploded from the hit. The hardened flesh cracked open and spurted blood into space! The Archdemon was flung back from the force, only to be hit by another projectile and get pushed back towards Dawnbringer Minor.

--*Kwwwweeeee!*

The Archdemon raised its arms, almost looking like it was surrendering. It then folded the space around it, and like a magician disappearing into his own cloak, it enveloped the fabric of space around it and... vanished completely.

"It ran away!"

[Oh!]

Sergeant Aroha and Princess Riznah exclaimed. I was just as surprised.

"Hmph. After all that, it ran away before I could kill it!"

"No, wait, that's not what I'm surprised about! How did you manage to make an Archdemon run away?!"

[If the Black Sisters knew about this, they'd faint in shock.] Princess Riznah muttered. Before she could say anything further, Sergeant Aroha shut the communicator off.

"Why?"

"We're out of energy gels, Lezirth!"

"Hm."

After withstanding every ability down to the last Ascended Kishin Arts, the energy gels are all out? I nodded.

Saika had already begun its move towards Dawnbringer Minor, quietly and quickly leaving the atmosphere of Critik-4. Though the Kishin Arts must have spent a great deal of energy, it was a proper Kishin, after all.

With Critik-4 behind it, Saika stopped at a distance away from Dawnbringer Minor.

There was about ten minutes before the Federation fleet could arrive and assess the situation on Critik-4. I'd never need more than ten minutes to take down a Kishin!

Part 2

Princess Riznah, the pilot of Kishin Saika, requested to reopen the communication channel. Her voice resumed on the speakers after reopening the channel.

[Shall we see the conclusion of our battle, pilot of the Federation? I am the Harakal of the Asa, Princess Riznah Ereshikigal! What is your name?]

"Pilot of Dawnbringer Minor, Lezirth Dawnbringer."

[Lezirth? Hm, a common name. I have no clue how you are managing to use Kishin Arts from such a weak model, but I assume it is already at its limits? Do you wish to surrender peacefully?]

"I refuse."

[Unfortunate. Someone like you should have some highly desirable genes.]

"What was that, a marriage proposal?"

If it was a proposal, it was probably the world's most casual, least acceptable proposal in history. I could almost blush after hearing such a direct request for my partnership.

[Unfortunately for you, we have no tradition for marriages like Humans do. But, once I have Kiske's child, I could consider having yours.]

“...”

For a moment, I tried to imagine Kiske and her being together, but my mind drew a blank.

Sergeant Aroha interrupted, unable to sit quietly. “I don't imagine someone like Kiske could have had any accomplishments to serve a Harakal. Why don't you surrender to us instead? We have a freedom of relationships over here. Isn't it beautiful, being able to romance anyone without barriers of social class?”

[How impudent, Umea! I...]

“Weren't you just crying to return Kiske to you a few moments ago? It was recorded too, if you want to hear it,” I added.

Princess Riznah became bright red. [I... no, I cannot. An Asa will forever remain an Asa. But I am a Harakal!]

She... must have loved honestly loved Kiske, and she had to do all she could to give military decorations to Kiske. However, pushing Kiske into opportunities for earning military honours meant that he was also constantly brought to death's doorstep. Now that Kiske was taken prisoner by us, her enemies, she must have been writhing in guilt and despair.

“If only you dropped your worthless pride as a Harakal sooner, Kiske would have never been held prisoner by us, don't you think?” Sergeant Aroha used this to taunt her.

As she was with William Mayer, too, Sergeant Aroha sometimes had shown a surprisingly cruel side of her, and it had surfaced once again. Even after a Smart Bomb blasted off Princess Riznah's eye and arm, she had maintained her courageous stance; and then, she was struck with great pain by immaterial, harmless words.

[Shut up! I just... no, any more words will only slow down your death, so I will end this chatter now.]

“How troublesome.” Sergeant Aroha sighed, and looked back at me. “So, do you have a plan, Lezirth?”

“Of course.”

At that time, I recalled the cockpit next to Dawnbringer Minor. It was found back at the stadium-- the cockpit that ejected off of the Alliance Alter-Armour when I drove it to the

stadium, and inside was a seat full of energy gels from the Chinatown's supermarket. I had teleported it away as soon as I had discovered it, and then I teleported it back to me for this time of need.

I grabbed the cockpit, ripped it apart, and brought the energy gels into my cockpit.

"I was wondering what your plan was, and it's this again? What is this, some sort of dictatorship country where you get a stretch break for every thousand times that you shovel?" Sergeant Aroha sighed, unfolding the army shovel.

"If you please, Aroha."

"Hmph... fine, Lezirth." Sergeant Aroha leaned forward, but turned back around after a thought. "B-by the way, this pose is a little too dirty, isn't it? If you and I were naked right now, then..."

"D-don't say anything like that! I finally started focusing my mind elsewhere! Did you really have to remind me before a big fight?" I grumbled, moving Dawnbringer Minor.

Kishin Saika approached from the front, spreading the Skirt Bits in all directions.

[Here I come!]

"Bring it on, lovestruck girl!"

[Y-you bastard!]

Taking my bait, Saika reacted, opening its right hand. Bright, white rays of light shot from its palm. Though the attack was at lightspeed, I easily dodged it beforehand.

When in a one-on-one fight, even before the opponent begins pulling the trigger, my mind says "this is when my opponent will pull it." When in a close-quarter battle, even as I frantically beat on the opponent's defenses, there are moments that my mind says "this is when my opponent will begin to retaliate." Combat Insight, I believe it was called.

Asa Princess Riznah Ereshikigal was definitely proficient at controlling a Kishin, able to use highly complex Kishin Arts that Prince Tenseron couldn't, and she had perfectly understood the extent of her abilities.

Yet, she was no match for me.

Cleverness and experience! There was no one who could possibly match me in those qualities. I am Lezirth Dawnbringer! I am the legendary soldier who lived in the battlefield ever since the age of space began!

--Shwooo-!

The Skirt Bits reflected the rays of light, aiming for my backside. Saika's main plan of attack appeared to be trapping Dawnbringer Minor and bombarding it with deadly beams reflecting all around by the Skirt Bits. I quickly dashed forward to escape the Skirt Bits' encirclement.

[Kuh!]

Kishin Saika moved back. Thundergod Saika was not a melee-centric Kishin, but a controller-type Kishin designed for mid-range combat. She could not have desired to get in close range with a ground combat Alter-Armour like Dawnbringer Minor.

[Get out of here!]

A ray of light flared from Saika's chest.

A blast of deadly light!

But Dawnbringer Minor was already in motion to dodge any attacks. Whatever couldn't be dodged was deflected by the Black Barrier, and then it swung behind Saika.

And a powerful kick to its back!

But suddenly, Saika jumped away at an unbelievably fast speed. It had warped away in place of one of the Skirt Bits, using one of Saika's special abilities.

--Kishin Arts! Shining Planar Emporio!

And that was not the end of it. One of the Skirt Bits shot away and accelerated to near-lightspeed, flying around erratically. In the blink of an eye, Dawnbringer Minor and Saika were both trapped within blinding lights caused within the flying Skirt Bit's wake.

--No. For Saika, the area was now her own territory.

Dawnbringer Minor was the prey that fell into her territory!

[Here it comes, Lezirth!]

I grinned.

[Gah! That snarky attitude of yours! We'll see how long that'll last! Hiiiyaaaah!]

Kishin Saika clasped its hands in front of its chest. Between its fingers, bright, luminous spots appeared. It began with one point, then ten, and then a hundred.

[Warning! High energy output detected!]

Its energy levels spiked up, prompting my pilot assistance program to begin throwing warnings.

“Waaah! L-Lezirth! What are we gonna do about that thing?!” Sergeant Aroha panicked, hugging my head in fear. I briefly went back to being smothered to death by her chest.

“Hpfh... ffh... s-stop it, Sergeant! We’re going to be fine, just fine! Ack--!”

S-something went in my mouth just now!

I quickly shoved the panicking Sergeant Aroha away. Quite so, if Saika had released all of its energy from those gatherings of light, they would ceaselessly chase down Dawnbringer Minor as they bounce in every direction by jumping off of the reflective sphere created by the Skirt Bit. Sergeant Aroha was right to be scared!

[You have no need to try and prolong your life by using some useless Kishin Art! This is the end, Lezirth!]

“Is that so?! I never lose to little lovestruck girls!”

And then, Saika disappeared.

Saika switched its place around with the near-light-speed Skirt Bit in succession, almost appearing to move as Dawnbringer moves with the Dance of Discord, and releasing the rays of light. A shower of deadly beams approached Dawnbringer Minor for a kill from every direction.

However--

--Kishin Arts! Dark Spiral! Palm of Seven Chains!

Dawnbringer Minor struck with the Dark Spiral in a full circle, seven times. Reviving the old black holes that were once created by Dawnbringer in the past, linked together with the Ergosphere, the Dark Spirals twisted the space to grip onto the bombardment of beams.

Dawnbringer Minor hopped back and approached the encircling ring of light. It pulled out the ground combat blade in preparation.

Though I used the Dance of Discord myself, such an ability was an extremely difficult thing for me to control. Then, Thundergod Saika’s Shining Planar Emporio must have been difficult for it to control, too!

With that prediction, I quantized the blade to transform it into a great sword of light.

Saika was afraid of my approach, so it had scattered the Skirt Bits to erratically move itself away from my attacks. If anyone were to try to shoot or cut it down, then they couldn't even scratch the edge of its armour. That was the true meaning behind the name of Discordant Thundergod!

But what if I were to try this?

I raised the Sacred Sword and stabbed into the shimmering, twisting light. Eventually, Saika's pilot would throw the armour into the blade on her own, unable to consciously control its movement accurately.

And, of course!

[Kyaaaagh!]

Princess Riznah screamed. Even if Saika could control the quantum field, it wasn't easy for it to control its movement in near-lightspeed!

The Shining Planar Emporio was stopped, and Saika appeared at a distance very far away from Dawnbringer Minor. Even as the special technique got broken, she was careful to put her a distance away from the melee-specialized Armour. How very practiced.

I gripped onto the Sacred Sword and spun around.

--Sacred Sword! Void Slash!

Dawnbringer Minor slashed upon the beams of light, held from escaping by the Dark Spiral. As the Dark Spiral shattered, the lights bounced away from the Dark Spiral at lightspeed. At the end of the beams was Saika.

[Kuh!]

The Skirt Bit created a defensive formation around Saika. The beams struck against the shielding and exploded, and then exploded again. Even in the soundless space, I could feel the shockwaves and energy radiating, giving a very dramatic feel of a silent film.

At the same time, Dawnbringer Minor was blinking on and off. It had the looks of a student in a lazy afternoon, dozing off in the middle of a class after a big lunch. Dawnbringer Minor had been pushed to its limit!

"Lezirth! We're out of energy gels!"

As expected, the shovel had made the gel feeding extremely quick. Thanks to that, Dawnbringer Minor was able to use all manner of high-intensity techniques, but was it really it? I had hoped that the Void Slash would have been the end of Saika...

But there was no way that a Kishin would fold that easily.

[Argh! What are you, a monster?!]

Despite the heavy damage done by the Void Slash, Saika was still fully operational. It was the difference between a proper Kishin and a Minor-class. Even after such a one-sided beating, my side was dangerously close to depleting all energy, and the Kishin was making a quick recovery from all damages. Saika was at the height of its rage and fear, retaliating back immediately. Even as Dawnbringer Minor was becoming unoperational!

I jumped out of Dawnbringer Minor, teleporting in front of Saika's chest-- the cockpit. Jumping through the Hyperspace and into complete vacuum with my unprotected body made my insides cry, but I endured it, swinging Colorado and slicing Saika's cockpit. Colorado quantized, cutting inside the cockpit and splattering the seat with blood.

[Gah!] Prinzess Riznah cried.

I had aimed for her arm-- the one that was mostly intact. Saika normally would have been able to protect its pilot from even the Sacred Sword, but my repeated strikes must have caused lasting damage.

[Aaaaaaargh!]

Saika suddenly became inoperational. Princess Riznah could operate Saika remotely, but as long as she was within the cockpit, she had to have been manually piloting. As her remaining arm was cut, Saika had briefly lost control.

I shoved Colorado inside the cockpit, placing it under Princess Riznah's chin. As she grabbed at her wound, I phase shifted through the cockpit glass to enter inside.

"Haah... haah..." Princess Riznah hugged onto her cut arm and glared at me. Her eyes were full of hostility, but she also bore the expression of admiration.

"You could kill me from the outside, had you wanted to... why have you come inside? Are you intending to hold me prisoner? Or... perhaps?" She rolled up her body, eyeing me. She was trying to hide her body away, but her breasts were looking like they were about to burst out of her tight pilot suit.



“Is this your arm?” I held the dismembered arm up. It was so cleanly cut by the Sacred Sword, that a Portable Medic could reattach it right back with a quick operation. The real problem was whether or not her body could take any more operations...

I used telekinesis to gather up the splattered blood around the cockpit, injecting it back down her wounds, so that she wouldn't suffer from blood loss. “Use that Medic to put it back on. And, also...” I deactivated the quantized sword and used Colorado's edge to wound my arm. Blood dripped out, combining with her blood.

With medical nanomachines in my blood, I could transfuse to anybody else. On top of that, my blood repaired the oxidization that occurred in her blood during its time splattering around the cockpit. She could survive the surgery just fine.

“What... are you doing? Are you pitying me?”

“No, let's call it appeasement. I might have to stay on friendly terms with the Alliance in the future.” I answered, putting the cut arm against her wound. The Portable Medic began reattaching the arm to her body.

I produced the first aid kit from below the pilot seat and handed over antibiotics and painkillers to her. She stared at me like a distrusting wild animal for a moment, but Princess Riznah soon took the medicines and swallowed them down.

“Make your return soon. We've run out of time. The Federation fleet will be here.”

“What about Kiske?”

“I'll return him to you without a single scratch. It'll be difficult to do that now.”

There really was no time. The Federation fleet was within the Critik system, and they were soon going to be in communication range with Critik-4. At that point, I could make no excuses about the happenings here.

Princess Riznah looked a little better, probably because of the painkiller. I had noticed now that her eyes were a bluish-gray.

“Why are you leaving me alive? Am I not a war criminal from your side's perspective? And would it not come with a great reward to capture Saika and I?”

“Do I have any duty to answer that?” I shook my head. Even if I told the full truth, this girl wouldn't understand any of it. So, I backed away. “I'll be off, then.”

I shifted out of Saika to return to Dawnbringer Minor. As I made my return, Sergeant Aroha was sitting in the pilot's seat in my place, glancing at me with crossed arms.

"Hmm? What's happening, Sergeant?"

"Hm. Lezirth, your... clothes smell like some other woman!" She dug into my chest with her face, grumbling.

I grinned. "You also smell blood and medicine, right?"

Then, Sergeant Aroha put her arms around my waist. As she quietly pressed her body against mine, I gently combed down her hair.

"It's my turn now, right?" Sergeant Aroha looked back at Critik-4. The spreading corruption from the center of the stadium was impossible to see from simple radar. And a camera zooming into the stadium saw... the cracks growing larger and larger.

"Yep. Anytime you want, Sergeant."

"I really don't want to be using the power of the Asa..."

As she grew up, she never received her family's love and became confused by her identity, denying her existence as an Asa. She was, however, needed to end the situation in Critik.

I held both of her hands, and Sergeant Aroha looked up.

"But... Lezirth will protect me, right?"

"That's right, Aroha. You can do it."

Those were the only words I could say.

* * *

I brought Dawnbringer Minor into the atmosphere of Critik-4. Behind me was Saika, attempting to teleport away with the captured cruiser.

She was still taking the cruiser after all that?! But it wasn't the time to get caught up on that. The Hyperspace corruption had to be taken care of before the Federation fleet's arrival.

"Dammit! It's always the same: a Harakal starting crap, and a Black Sister cleaning up the mess that's left behind! Lezirth! The start of the cataclysm! Fly me to the stadium!"

"Right!"

Thankfully, there were no more eldritch beings appearing from the cracks. Thanks to the Archdemon consuming a huge number of the Hyperspace creatures, there weren't too many left over. It was a good thing to remove the Archdemon after all.

[Lezirth! Are you okay?! You only have thirty seconds!]

[That's just the time needed for the Federation fleet to get into viewing range! We'll have a bit more time for them to detect the Hyperspace corruption in the area! Should I try to slow the fleet down?]

"Yes, please, Luise! Just a little more time!" I shouted, standing in the middle of the stadium. Sergeant Aroha walked out of the cockpit and into the warped world, standing on the palm of Dawnbringer Minor.

"I only did this once when I was young, so I have no idea how well this is going to work."

She inspected the stadium-- what used to be the stadium, and raised her arms towards the cracks. And then she began singing.

It was a foreign song that I couldn't understand.

It was a very solemn, yet beautiful song.

I couldn't believe that she was the same girl who'd joke around most of the time. As she sung, her body began glowing as silver tattoos appeared all over her body.

The Black Sisters of Asa, they called them. Would it not have been more appropriate to call them the Silver Sisters?

With that thought, the world began changing.

--Swoooooo--!

The air resonated around us.

And suddenly, a black circle appeared on Sergeant Aroha's hand.

It was the source of the cataclysm! Even though I had no way of knowing that, I somehow felt it to be true. The ominous feeling and power that crept out of the circle was the same as the atmosphere around the stadium.

"Kyaah!"

At that moment, Sergeant Aroha screamed in pain..

“No!” I jumped out of the cockpit. “Are you okay?! Sergeant?!”

“Lezirth?! What about Dawnbringer Minor?”

“I can control it remotely too! That’s not important! What happened to you?!”

“...Heh heh. It’s been a long time since I’ve done this, so it’s not working out so well. It’s my first time trying it with something this big, and I guess it’s too tough starting with a big one right away.”

“...What?” I was at a loss for words. “So it’s hurting you?”

“... ..That was a joke, Lezirth.”

“No, I... just don’t know how to react to such a pan-dimensional sexual harassment.”

She collected herself and resumed her singing. The dark crack crept up her wrist, and climbed up her arm.

I looked at Sergeant Aroha. She was sweating profusely. She was obviously in huge pain, but she held her ground and continued her song.

[The Federation fleet arrived in the Critik system! I’m going to create an artificial storm over the area, so don’t be surprised if it gets cloudy!] Ensign Meihowa warned. As she announced, it began raining quite soon.

The Archdemon had previously flash-frozen the atmosphere around the stadium, so the area was covered with rain clouds. So the plan was to cover the planet with rain clouds to prevent visual inspections?

The black ring had almost reached Sergeant Aroha’s shoulders. She raised that arm. Her sweat was now replaced with the raindrops, but I could still see that she was in great pain.

She was definitely putting her life at risk.

Stupid...

I should have realized before with a little more thought. It wasn’t normal for a single person to stop a Hyperspace corruption on a planet’s scale. Why did Sergeant Aroha accept such a task so quickly?

If I had realized that this task would have put her life to a test, I wouldn’t have been quick to ask her to do this in the first place. Right. Even if I knew that her life was at stake, this

action could save millions of lives, so I still may have asked her to perform this. Still... I couldn't help but feel powerless.

Sergeant Aroha gestured at me.

I approached behind her.

Her father was taken by the Asa, and she herself was appreciated by neither the Federation nor the Alliance due to her half-Asa identity.

And she was still singing out of a sense of duty and the goodness of her heart.

I watched over her, afraid of her falling down after spending her energy.

'I promised that I'd protect her... and I can't do anything but watch her in silence.'

I would be glad to endure the harm in her place, but only the Black Sister of the Asa could accomplish this task.

And finally... the black ring escaped Sergeant Aroha's hand. She stopped her singing, and slowly collapsed down. I quickly supported her in surprise, hugging her.

She had such a womanly body, and there was not a single part of her that wasn't attractive that I could lay my hands upon. But my desires were quelled by an even stronger feeling of guilt.

"You really did your best, Sergeant."

"Yep. I put in my hundred percent this time, Lezirth."

Rainfall blanketed the earth. I picked the Sergeant up, and looked at the ground through the rain. The cracks around the stadium were disappearing, and the demolished city reappeared. The ruined stadium and the parking lot aside, the place was returning back to normal.

"Heh... I still got it after all this time. Damn, I'm... good..."

"Hey! Sergeant?!"

[The corruption is cleansed! You're pushing it now, Lezirth! Get back in Dawnbringer Minor!]

[Tell them Sergeant Aroha piloted it! Hurry! Fly above the atmosphere!]

Listening to Admiral Luise and Ensign Meihowa, I walked back inside the cockpit of Dawnbringer Minor with Sergeant Aroha in my arms. She was limp without strength and nearly rested on my body.

“Are you okay, Sergeant?”

“Mmh. I’m... as fine as ever.” Sergeant Aroha resumed sitting on my knees. I had to report this situation as Sergeant Aroha having been the pilot of Dawnbringer Minor, but she was too tired for that to be convincing. How was I supposed to ride Dawnbringer Minor?

But when Sergeant Aroha took over the controls for Dawnbringer Minor... it stabilized its energy levels.

‘Huh? She’s still pretty good, even in this state!’

I had worried that the synchronization level might be low with Sergeant, but she was as good as any other high-ranking officer. In retrospect, she was an elite among elites within the Asa. Her decision making skills and abilities were way above average.

“Are you really okay, Sergeant?”

“Yeah. Phew, our vacation’s over just like that, huh?” Sergeant Aroha rested her head on me. I let her use my shoulder as her pillow and smiled.

“It was fun, though.”

“Yeah, it was.” Sergeant Aroha caressed my face gently.

I spaced out as rainclouds dispersed. The sun was burning bright red as it sunk down the Southern horizon. Above the red sky were the Federation cruisers and destroyers entering the planet’s atmosphere. Sergeant Aroha noticed them, waving Dawnbringer Minor’s hands to signal to them.

It was... very close. If we were even slightly late, Sergeant Aroha’s identity would have been revealed, and she might have been forced to clean corrupted planets like some vacuum cleaner. Even later, and this entire planet may have been burned down by a storm of quantum torpedoes.

I guess, even though Sergeant Aroha got extra weight on her shoulders, everything worked out pretty well.

I blankly stared at the beautiful dusk in the horizon, and nodded.

Yep, everything worked out pretty well.

Chapter 04: The End of the Vacation

[The coup at Critik had ended with the Alliance, after their promise to back the operation, massacring the population. The leader of the rebellion, Kasik, was killed. Kasik's mentor William Mayer was arrested by the Federation police on the charge of creating dissent among the population.]

The television displayed the news.

I turned off my PDA and looked out the window. On the other side of the observation deck of the cruiser's lobby was the sun setting on Critik-4.

Or, I guess, the sun's coming up on the other side of the horizon, while the sun's setting on this side.

There had been a lot of happenings in the short time that we were here.

I smiled bitterly as I looked upon the surface of Critik-4 from the observation windows. Sergeant Aroha was watching with me, though while receiving a glucose drip to recover from overexertion. And I was receiving an IV drip myself from the massive blood loss that I had suffered earlier.

It was almost funny how we looked, being a slave to the IV pole together.

"Aroha, this is the planet that you saved. You should feel proud for that."

Ensign Meihowa handed her a cup of coffee. She handed me a cup, too, and smiled.

"Is that so? Then, can I get back down to the surface and take everything from the big name brand shops?"

"I would like to do that myself, but neither of us will likely get to use any of them for a while."

The battle in the Oden system had grown worse, so we were going to be back in the heart of the war. While we were on vacation, the Federation army operations had relocated Ensign Meihowa to a different place.

The Thirteenth Special Forces Brigade.

It was a new group created by the survivors of Oden and the Kishin Ladyhawk.

The “special forces” name alone sounded fancy, but in reality, it represented the will of the Command to put us through whatever difficult task they need solving at the moment. That is, it was the brigade to throw into any dangerous battle!

“And now, we’re joining that brigade.” Admiral Luise said, Rabbitte in her arms. If she had wanted, then we may have all been transferred to a different platoon, but she must have not done so. I never thought about escaping the heat of battle, regardless.

And beside her was a silver-blond girl, tracing her footsteps without daring to catch anyone’s eye along the way. She was wearing a man’s uniform, but... wait, hold on. Isn’t that Kiske?

His eyes were darting around the room like a scared animal’s, shivering in his unfitting uniform. Understandably, he was in the middle of the enemy’s army, so he was right to be scared. And even though he was wearing the smallest size of the uniform, his sleeves were still too long and flapped around as he moved.

“He’s Kiske Risner. Private. He’s in our brigade from now on.”

Kiske became distressed at Admiral Luise’s introduction. “No, wait, I...!”

“If you don’t like it, do you want to go to the army prison instead?”

Kiske shook violently as Admiral Luise asked. Of course, a lot of bad things were bound to happen if you put a guy who looked like that into prison.

I shrugged and sighed. “Princess Riznah will be after us as long as she lives if we have him around. Are we just going to return him when she finds us?”

“Yes! U-until then, I’ll cooperate with you people! But I’ll never lend my hand to killing another Asa!” Kiske shouted, confidently.

I sighed at her-- I mean, him. “When am I ever going to need your help?”

“I-- uh... nnggh.” Kiske held his fists in frustration. But it was the truth-- according to Sergeant Aroha, an Asa, the male Asas couldn’t use the traditional magic, and their only ability was of the dirty kind.

And to think I’ll ever need that help...

Hm.

No, absolutely not! I’ll have none of that!

And as I thought to myself, Private Pencolt entered the break room. The short vacation had put back fat on his body, returning him to his old looks.

“Hey~ Lezirth! You got what you deserved after trying to spend a vacation with great girls! Hehehe.”

“Didn’t you get your own vacation canceled, too?”

“I’m sad too, but I can’t stand watching you building a harem for yourself, yeah?”

“I’m not building a harem for myself!” I explained, but watching Pencolt laugh had made me laugh just as hard. It was terrible-- I was in serious trouble if I felt glad in any way for seeing him again. “So, did you get placed into the Special Forces too?”

“Yep.”

“Then, you’re passing by Critik base before getting passed off into the Special Forces? Then we’ll have a little time, right?”

I tried to recall the time.

But Pencolt was looking at me like I was insane. “But this is the Special Forces.”

“Huh?”

“This cruiser is the Thirteenth Special Forces Brigade’s main base and the command center.”

“... ..”

We were returning to the battlefield without a moment’s rest? I could already feel the tough times ahead of us.

I mean, as Lezirth Dawnbringer, I had always lived this kind of life, but I couldn’t adapt after having an actual moment of relaxation as a Private. “So, we’re... going straight back into the war?”

“Yep. Well, we don’t have any orders yet, so we can rest now. Oh, and we got a new roommate that I haven’t met before.”

“Hmm?” I became curious. “Are we roommates in here, too?”

“Yeah, got any problem?”

“No, but I’m not under watch anymore! And you still are.” Was my effort in the Azoran system not enough?

Pencolt scoffed. “What a joke! That’s what I should say to you! Anyway, our room’s down in the corner, so we’re the only room with three sharing while everyone else gets four. And, mmh... let’s see. The new guy is Kiske Risner, I hear. Do you know anything about this guy?” Pencolt spoke into the PDA.

I turned my attention to Kiske in shock. Kiske is my roommate?!

“I had no choice if we’re keeping him around close.” Admiral Luise nodded.

Kiske bowed down to greet Pencolt. “I am Kiske Risner. Pleased to meet you.”

Wait, this can’t be good. Kiske is too pretty-looking, and with Pencolt as a roommate...?

It-it wasn’t going to end in a disaster, right?

Already, Pencolt was eyeing a full inspection on Kiske with his sharp eyes. “Hmm? Wait a minute!”

“Kyaa!”

Pencolt suddenly felt around Kiske’s body.

Though everyone else knew Kiske was also a guy, I jumped up at how criminal the scene looked. “What are you doing?!”

“I knew it, he’s a guy!” Pencolt shook his hands and wiped them on a wet paper towel. “No matter how pretty you are, I’m not interested in another guy!”

Pencolt left with those words, grumbling all the way back to his room.

Kiske was sobbing in the aftermath of the sudden harassment, but Pencolt refused to even throw him another glance as he walked back.

...It was a terrible sight.

Pencolt, at that moment, appeared like the boldest man I’d ever seen.

“Ugh. We’ve got nothing but bad news ahead of us.” Ensign Meihowa brushed her hair back tiredly, imagining the dark days ahead.

